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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARCH

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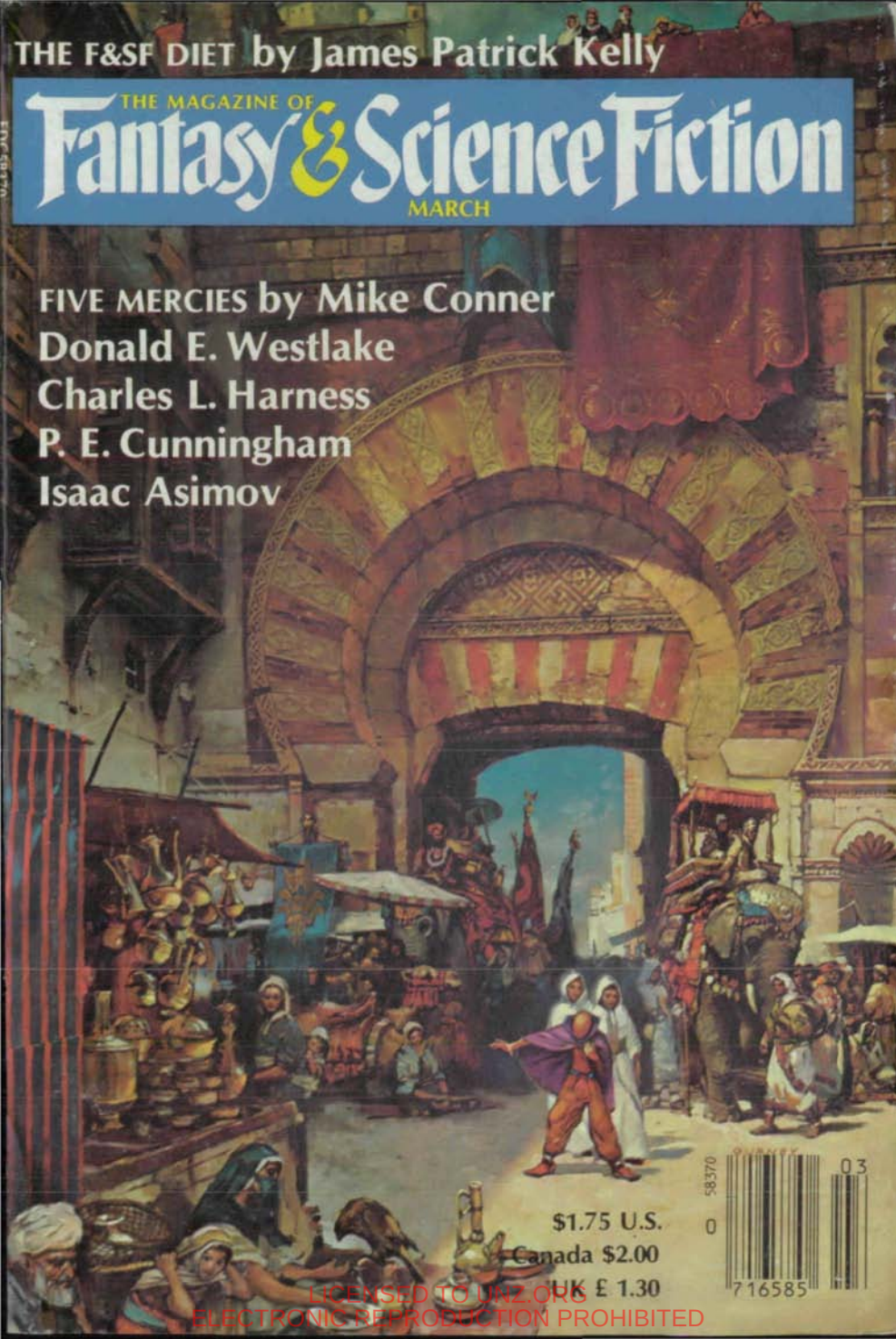

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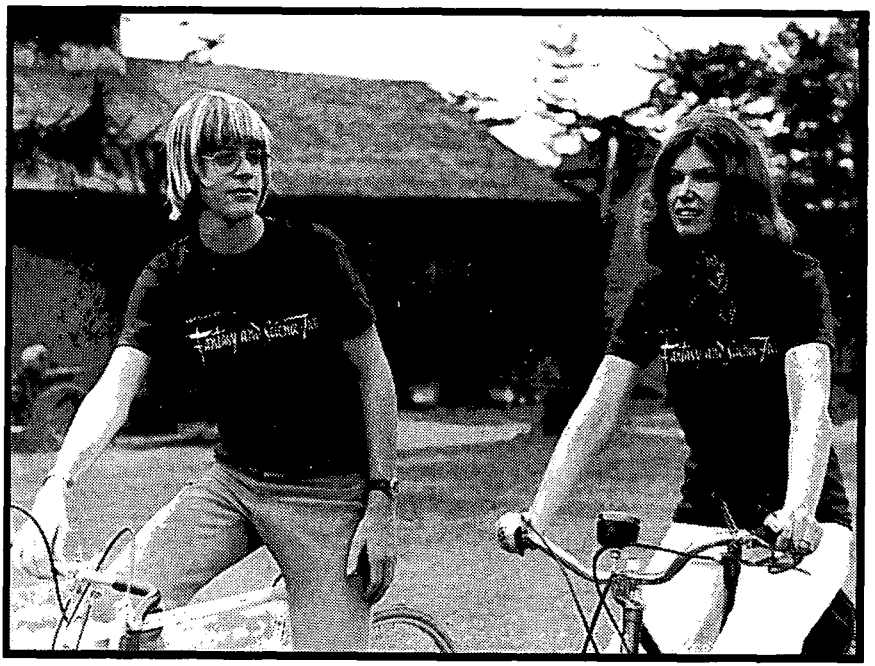

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P. E. Cunningham has quickly earned a reputation as a premier SF storyteller with her tales about the planet New Eden and its inhabitants, the immense and telepathic pterosaurian reptiles. Here is a third — completely independent — story in a series that includes "Healer" (July 1982) and "To Slay the Dragon," (October 1983).

The Timeseer

BY

P. E. CUNNINGHAM

The man stood alone in wiry grass at the edge of a prehistoric forest, staring up at the darkening sky. He gasped for breath; the rank air was acrid in his nostrils. The rifle slipped in his sweaty hands; he tightened his grip on the outlawed weapon and waited. For hours they had hunted him, but he could foresee every move they would make, and so eluded them. Now, in this, the place of his visions, he paused and listened to the ever-growing crack of the pteros' wings against the alien winds.

They appeared over the edge of the trees, six of them, anvil-headed, serpent-necked, long tails thrashing the air behind them. Each bore a rider, four armed with spears, two with bow and arrow. The man ducked beneath the cover of the trees. They passed over him, unaware, their minds deaf to the noise of his own. He wasted no more worry on them. They would not find him, not until after he'd accomplished the task he'd stolen the rifle to perform. By then, it would be too late — for them and for their world.

He stepped from beneath the drooping arms of the tree, with unblinking, blade-sharp eyes. *You can't stop me,* his voice said in the man's mind. *Your people will never have the Nest, and I will have my vengeance.*

"No." The word was a moan. "I can't let that happen." He lifted the rifle to his shoulder and took aim at Allarn's head.

And could not shoot.

Allarn chuckled. He began to change. His body melted from stocky to slim, the pine-needle hide darkened to midnight black. Harsh golden eyes transfixed the man, chill with the mercilessness of the insane.

Chortling, the reptile dropped a wing and knocked the gun aside. The

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man screamed as the creature fell upon him with extended claws.

The screams woke him. He jerked up in bed in the darkened room, drenched in the salty stink of sweat. Thrusting the constricting sheets aside, he fumbled across his nightstand for the tape recorder kept there for precisely this purpose. His hands shook as he punched in a cassette and began to dictate the details of his dream. He spoke deliberately, without haste or panic. There was plenty of time. The images would persist for hours, not fade at once upon awakening as a true nightmare would. This frightened him, for these were characteristics of a special kind of dream he'd had often before throughout his life. This was the kind of dream that always came true.

The museum kept its natural history exhibits on the lower levels, including its pride, the collection of dinosaurs. The man passed among the looming skeletons without fear. They were, after all, only bones. Former lords of the earth, they had been supplanted by the quicker, more intelligent mammals. *That's how she goes,* he thought, *one species, one race, over the others. Until it's mankind's turn.*

And with that thought barely finished, he raised his eyes to the wall, and saw the thing he had dreamed.

How long he stood there he did not know. He stared at the thing and remembered a voice, a reptile with the mind of a man, mad eyes—

A pair of slim hands clapped over his eyes. "Guess who, big brother?"

He yelped loudly and whirled. The girl jerked her hands away and jumped back with a squeak of her own. The man grinned sheepishly. "Corinne ... Corinne, *please* do not do that again. I never even heard you. Been in here long?"

"Not long. I was up in the Native American section. The department secretary said you were at the museum, so I just assumed...." She let her voice die out as she studied his face. "What's the matter, Clayton?"

"Nothing. I ... I had a dream last night."

She caught her breath; he heard fear in the sound. "A time vision?"

"It had to be. It was like the others. I could smell things, feel, hear voices, but this time ... it wasn't on Earth this time. I was on another planet — a colony, I think. They were there."

He waved his hand at the wall. Corinne's eyes followed the gesture to the exhibit fastened there. The long glass case held the remains of an ancient flying reptile, turkey-sized with reed-thin bones and the representation of stretched-hide wings painted on the background. The plaque beneath the case read *Pteranodon.*

"I saw them there," Clayton said to the case on the wall. "Not like this tiny thing, but huge, large enough" — he reflected — "large enough to carry a man. They had wings like a bat's, and tails, sort of like — like that over

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there." He pointed out to Corinne a related creature, with a whiplike tail that ended in a leaf-shaped tip, labeled *Rhamphorynchus*. "There were men there, too, but it wasn't their world." He stared at the fossilized bones of the pteranodon. "It was *their* world ... their...."

Our Nest, Allarn said to him. *You think we couldn't fight you if you tried to take it from us. You're going to learn how wrong you are. Humans will never control the Nest. Never.*

Corinne touched his arm, jostling him out of his trance. "You really think they exist?"

"I saw them."

"In a dream. It may not have been a vision, you know. Maybe it was a real dream, and you're working yourself up over nothing. Think about it, Clayton. All the colonies are known. If those ptero-things lived on one, we'd have heard about it."

"This could be one of the lost colonies," Clayton said. "Remember the groups that left Earth back in the Expansionist days? There were colonies all over that Earth lost track of — back-to-nature types, religious cults, the Pure Race advocates, special interest and ethnic groups, the—"

He bit off the final word, but she guessed. "The Indians?" A thin, angry line grew between her brows. "I should have known. What's the angle this time, Clayton Blackbear? Don't tell me the white man was responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs."

"Cory, please!" His sister flinched, as if he had slapped her. Clayton dropped his gaze. "Sorry. Look, I didn't make this up. That planet's real. I'm going to find it. And then ... I'm going there."

"You?" She was flabbergasted. "You, leave Earth? You, the original stick-to-the-home-planet advocate? All right, don't get upset. So you leave Earth, assuming this world you dreamed exists. How do you intend to pay passage on a university professor's salary?"

"I'll get a grant. Join a research team. Sign on as crew on a starship. I don't know!" He heard his voice shrilling and quelled it fiercely. "All I know is, I'll get there. I have to; I saw myself there. I have to—"

Allarn's voice was a sword thrust. *You can't stop me.*

"... find out what the vision means," Clayton finished unsteadily. "You believe in my visions, don't you, Corinne? You always did before."

"But you never had a vision like this before. An unknown world...." The fear in her eyes reflected his own. "Tell me your dream, Clayton. Everything."

Clayton glanced up at the glass case. "Allarn.... I've already told you the highlights. The rest is just picky details."

Corinne canted her head in that way she had, the way that said, I know you're lying. He waited for the storm to hit, but she only said, "So what

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are you going to do?"

"Check around for word on that planet, I guess. Then wait and see what happens." He sucked in a long, heavy breath. It tasted of acid. Or maybe that was his imagination.

"Well, then," Corinne said briskly, "I doubt if your dream will come true within, say, the next hour or two, so how about I treat you to lunch? If I know you, you skipped breakfast again, and you've got classes this afternoon."

Clayton chuckled. "That's my little sis. Always knows what I need." Like this offer of lunch, a diversion to steer his mind away from the terror of his dream. He agreed to let himself be diverted, for the moment. She accepted the arm he offered her, and they strolled together out of the hall of dinosaurs.

Though it seemed to Clayton the pteranodon watched his retreat, that he could feel it gloating.

After lunch Clayton stopped by the faculty lounge for a chat and a quick cup of coffee before his two o'clock class. Someone had abandoned a morning paper on the card table. The headline story leaped at Clayton's eyes like a reptile's claws. Today, it proclaimed, the government released word of the rediscovery of a colony, a semi-historic world settled by a religious cult nearly a century ago. They had found people living there, descendants of the colonists, in the company of immense pterosaurian reptiles. The cataloged name of the world had been New Eden. Its inhabitants called it the Nest.

"If you're not going to eat that, Clayton," Corinne said, "would you at least stop torturing it?"

Clayton glanced briefly at what had started its existence as a steak, but now was mangled to bits. "Sorry, Cory. Guess my mind's on other things."

"The dream again?"

"No. It hasn't really bothered me lately." A lie. In the weeks since his initial nightmare, the vision had been increasing both in frequency and intensity. He heard Allarn's voice at odd moments, time flashes, tangents to the dream. As the visions came closer together, so, too, did the reality draw near. Soon he would have to face his dream, leave Earth—

He jabbed savagely at a bit of steak. It teetered on the tines of his fork for a moment before toppling free. He let it escape. "If you want to know what's wrong ... well, for starts, I quit my job this afternoon."

"You mean you got fired." The anger line dented the space between her brows. "Don't try to lie to me, Clayton. You had a fight with Dean Fiske, didn't you?"

"I wanted a sabbatical. He refused. One thing led to another, and well, I guess I lost my temper. Look, Cory, it's no big deal. I was getting bored with teaching, anyway."

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"Losing your job is not a big deal? Don't try to wave this off! I don't know how many times I've warned you to watch yourself with Fiske. It is *not* 'kowtowing to the palefaces.' A simple thing like courtesy—"

"Courtesy?" Clayton threw down his fork. "You want courtesy? Let me tell you about our meeting. Fiske did a lot of sneering about how I'd've never got my job at all if it weren't for government requirements to have a specific percentage of minority teachers on faculty. That he hired me only to plug up an ethnic gap. That he wouldn't hire me again if I crawled on my belly, government regs or no. The words I can take; I've heard 'em enough. I wish you could've seen his eyes, though, Cory. Glaring at me like I was subhuman. A savage with a little book learnin' and uppity notions. That's the kind of courtesy I got."

Corinne set her delicate hands against the table and pushed her chair back, away from him. "Did you ever consider, big brother, that his attitude might have been justified? I've sat in on a few of your lectures. Some of them are pretty one-sided; even you have to admit it. If there's any prejudice involved, Fiske's not the only guilty one."

Clayton sneered. "My sister, the peacemaker. First to pass the pipe around. Your kind was first to get it in the gut when Whitey decided he wanted Indian land—"

She inched herself farther away from the table, her face averted, rigid. "Clayton, please. Don't start that again."

"Start what? Telling you a few truths about your friends? Your white friends? Sure, things are fine now — you're just another grad student. Wait'll you want a position. Still, I don't know, it might work out for you. You're pretty, and Whitey likes redskin squaws. Maybe some Great White Father will toss you a crumb, like they did me. It's the least they can do, since they took our country away from us—"

"Hundreds of years ago!" she shouted. "Clayton, this is *now*. We're not Injuns and palefaces and whatnot anymore. We're *human beings*, all together on one world. If you can't forget, can't you at least forgive?"

She was death-pale, shaking as if in pain. Clayton stared at her, shocked. Corinne was a creature of emotion, true, but she never exploded like this. He reached out to her, but she shoved violently away from the table, her chair slamming sideways to the floor, and fled across the room to the window, huddling herself in a mental cocoon that would not admit him. Clayton smirked, the old fury hard within him. "You'll find out," he said to her. "Hate is one thing time can't change. It will always be there. If you—"

If you had a weapon, Allarn whispered, *one that could destroy you as well as your enemies, but was the only*

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way to save your people from extinction ... would you use it? Would you let another use it?

The reptilian voice hissed away and vanished, gone as it came, without warning. Clayton found himself on his feet, his hands trembling. He glanced up and saw Corinne staring at him, raven eyes wide with fear for him, a fist crammed to her mouth. She relaxed it slowly and stretched the hand toward him, but let it fall before she completed the gesture. "Clayton...?"

"I'm O.K., Cory. Timeflash. I've been having them a lot lately." Might as well admit it. Might as well get the next part over with, too. "Cory, I'm leaving Earth."

That news shocked her more than the timeflash. Her eyes asked a million questions. "It's only for a while," he said, "two, three years at the most. Remember those government programs I told you about? The grants to researchers to collect information on New Eden? I didn't tell you I'd signed up. I guess they decided a cultural anthropologist would be useful. Maybe they had some ethnic gaps to plug up, too. Whatever, I got the notice this morning. I leave in five days."

She left the window and came to him, smiling. "*We* leave."

"Huh?"

"You think you're the only scientist in the family? I've been boning up on New Eden since the day you showed me that newspaper. Picture those people: a religious cult-colony, two-thirds of them dead from some alien 'fever,' the rest forced to depend on an intelligent species of reptile for survival. What did that do to them, psychologically? How did it change their beliefs, their perception of their new world? How do their thought processes differ from those of Earth humans?" She grinned like a little girl with a new doll. "Right up my street."

"Cory, you're not a social psychologist yet. You're still doing grad work."

"Precisely. What better way to earn my doctorate? I asked Professor Nevsky about it. He's got all sorts of connections in the psych field — a thing for brunettes." She fluffed her inky hair and giggled. "He put me in touch with a psych prof who's taking a team to New Eden on the same program you signed with. I managed to wrangle a seat on the basis of my papers and Nevsky's recommendation. My notice came two days ago. Maybe we can sit together on the ship."

"No." The word burst free before he could stop it. He tried to soften its bluntness. "Cory, this isn't a civilized colony they can line up for study. We're talking about a primitive people on an untamed planet. We don't know half the things we should about it. I'd feel better if you didn't go."

Her stare was glacial. "You're forbidding me?"

"Of course not. But — Cory, please. I promised our parents I'd look after you."

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"And I promised myself I'd look after *you*. Why haven't you told me anything specific about your dream? Did you see something you don't want me to know about?" His hesitancy was her answer. "I thought so. You're not the only talented member of the Blackbear clan. You dream the future; I read people. For weeks I felt uncertainity in you, like a mist. Then one morning I touched stone, and I knew you'd made a decision. Your dream terrifies you, and you've always sworn you'd never go into space. Yet you'd leave Earth for another planet because of this vision of yours. If it's that powerful, that urgent, that you'd defy all your fears to follow it, then I can't let you go alone. God knows what could happen to you, out in space all by yourself."

There was no arguing with Corinne when she got that iron tone in her voice. Nevertheless, he tried one final time. "I don't want you going, Corinne. There's danger—"

"Aha! To me?"

"Well, no...."

"To you, then. That settles it; I'm going. Besides, I've always wanted to fly through space and see other worlds." She slid her arms around his neck and grinned up into his face. "Do you hate me for that?"

Clayton smiled. Corinne, his beautiful little sister, copper skin, laughing cat-slanted eyes, soft ebon hair that held the scent of flowers. "I could never hate you, Cory," he said, and hugged her to him—

— and saw himself, in a swift and chilling flash, aboard a shuttle, not by choice, while the Nest dropped away behind him. The seat at his side was empty.

The first thing Clayton noticed about New Eden was the sour taste of the air. It sat like a slimy coating on his tongue, so that he had to constantly fight the urge to hawk and spit. The odors were wrong, too; even the flowers smelled hot and acrid, with a vicious bite. All this in his first deep breath, stepping through the hatch of the grounded shuttle. Proof hard as a slap in the face that he was no longer on Earth. Yet Earthfolk lived here in apparent comfort. *You'll adjust*, they told him. *Never*, he was certain. He could never be at home on this or any world that was not his own.

A pity, for the planet was beautiful. Layers of plush color, as seen from the shuttle: sultry greens of mosses, primitive conifers, and infant deciduous species, palomino grasses of the plains, huge umber crags frosted with snow and ice, red-sand cliffs where the pteros nested jutted out of the forest. A new Eden indeed, though Clayton preferred the native name: *Nest*. A home, a place of comfort, safety, welcome. Not for him, but sentiment appreciated.

He aimed his gaze at the sky. All expectations formed during the voyage vaporized like mist. There were indeed

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pteros up there, a score of them: anvil-headed, tailed, wings of leather stretched between elongated fingers, as he had foreseen in the dream. Fully a dozen were pine-needle green, and there must be countless others at the cliffs. How was he supposed to pick out Allarn, with no more to go on than that?

"Excuse me, sir, would you move, please? The others would like to disembark." The young man in Terran Security uniform touched his arm briefly and motioned down the ramp. Clayton nodded and went. Once on the ground, however, he turned his troubled face skyward again, mumbling his name distractedly to the second security man checking passenger identities against the printsheet in his hand. The pteros circled overhead, watching the newcomers with great interest, with occasional chittered comments among themselves. *Allarn?* Clayton thought. *Are you up there? Why do I have to stop you? What is it you're going to do?*

"May I have your attention, please." The arrivals' chatter quieted, and they turned toward the man who had spoken. He was solid-chested, fiftyish, and seemed more at home in his service uniform than did the younger guards. "Ladies, gentlemen, welcome to New Eden. I'm the base commander, Colonel Beaumont. I realize you've all have a long trip and would like nothing better right now than to flop into bed. However, we have our orders, and top of the list is physicals and booster shots for everyone. Immediately. So if you'll follow this gentleman here" — he tapped the young guard on the shoulder — "we can have you processed and settled in within a couple of hours. Any questions?"

"When do we get to see the natives?" someone in the back called out.

"Take a look upstairs." Beaumont grinned and jerked a thumb at the circling pteros. "There're natives. I'm sure you've all heard the stories. Yes, the pteros are telepathic—"

Telepathic? Clayton thought wildly. Allarn's voice in his head—

"— but you won't be able to hear them. Sorry, folks, but you'll have to make do with Chosen interpreters. They'll be sending a delegation tomorrow. Now, if you'll come this way...."

The teams gathered up their baggage and followed the security man. "Just a sec, you two," Beaumont said to Clayton and Corinne. He conferred for a moment with the other guard, who referred to his printsheet and nodded. "Clayton and Corinne Blackbear? You'll have to come with me. We've got orders on you two."

Clayton edged between Beaumont and his sister. "Some kind of trouble, Colonel?"

"Trouble? Oh, no, not like that. This is medical. Med Center Chicago sent us recommendations along with the results of your esper tests. They

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warned you about the Fever, of course?"

"We've been inoculated," Corinne said.

"So's everyone who comes here. We still lose 5 percent a year. Only those with high ESP ratings survive. Ratings like the Chicago staff got from you and your brother." His jovial tone faded rapidly before the gravity of his words. "We're not sure the standard booster shots will be enough for you. With your permission, we'd like to run additional tests, prepare a stronger injection—"

"Yes," Clayton agreed at once. He recalled vividly the briefing given to all of them about the Fever. Its first victims had been the orginal settlers, the Church of the Progressive Christians, also know as God's Chosen. Two-thirds of the three hundred Chosen died. For the rest, a fate Clayton considered far worse: acclimation, their body chemistry altered to bring it in line with that of their new home planet. A Chosen taken from New Eden would quickly die, unable to metabolize standard Terran foods and liquid. Remember this, the lecturer told them, if you decide to stay on New Eden and risk the Fever yourselves. Yes, it is allowed, but keep in mind, acclimation is irreversible. If you take the Fever, you can never return to Earth.

"We'll be happy to cooperate in any way we can," Clayton said.

"Fine." Beaumont's paternal smile returned. He ushered them toward the medical building where the others had already entered. Corinne went in with the security guard. Clayton lingered outside. "Damn," Beaumont muttered. "Forgot the forms. There're papers for you folks to fill out, permission for certain shots and tests, are you considering immigration, all that bull. Left 'em in my office again. Lousy paper work."

"Mind if I come along?" Clayton asked. "I've got a couple of questions about this place, and I don't want to worry my sister."

"Sure." They crossed the wide, unpaved street, headed for a silver prefab structure on the opposite side. "What's on your mind?"

"The Chosen. Do you think they're dangerous?"

"Them? Nah. They're still in the Stone Age. There're stories, though ... some of 'em are supposed to have psychic powers, like mind over matter and that. Could even be true; New Eden loves psi's. It'd snap up you and your sister in a minute. Sure you're not thinking of staying?"

"No." Clayton shuddered at the notion. He looked up; the sky was empty now. "What about the pteros? You said they were telepathic."

"With themselves and the Chosen. Not with us."

"But I heard—" No; that was a dream. "I heard differently. I guess I was wrong. Why can't we hear them?"

"Ah, there's a lot of technical garbage involved. It boils down to our

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poor Terran minds not being receptive enough. The Chosen say the pteros *could* shoot their thoughts at us, but it could overload our non-Nestian minds and cause brain damage or death. Of course, they can't hear us, either, so it works out." He conducted Clayton down a wide, sterile hallway toward the sealed door at the end. "So what could a pterodactyl have to say to us, anyway? Here we are."

The office was roomy, furnished solely in Terran-made products, with nothing to remind anyone that this was another world. Only the few plants betrayed it; their brown and curling leaves attested to their losing battle with New Eden's alien air. Beaumont went straight to his desk and began rummaging around in one of the drawers, mumbling to himself about useless paper work. Clayton glanced idly around the office. His gaze slammed to a halt on the left-hand wall. Ice filled his veins.

A square glass case dominated the wall, housing a variety of guns. All were antique, pre-lightbeam weapons, designed to fire bullets instead of modern adjustable laser hardlight. Six pistols with grips and muzzles of various lengths encircled the hub of the collection, a handsome, long-barreled projectile rifle.

Clayton locked his breath behind his teeth, lest it escape in a moan. The rifle. In his hands, aimed at Allarn's head—

"Impressive collection, huh?" Beaumont straightened from the desk, forms in hand, beaming. "Hobby of mine. You a fancier?"

"I ... have an interest. May I?"

Tucking the papers under his arm, the colonel drew a keychain from an inner pocket and unlocked the case. Clayton reached as if magnetized for the projectile rifle. His hands remembered the smooth feel of the polished wood stock, his arms the deadly weight. With an easy, familiar grace he swung it up to his shoulder and sighted through the cross hairs.

A long, narrow head, pine green ... mad golden eyes....

Clayton slowly lowered the rifle, fighting the overwhelming impulse to fling it away. Instead, he handed it to Beaumont. "Good stance," the colonel said. "You shoot?"

"I used to. It's been years. My dad and I used to go hunting when I was a kid." He tapped a finger at the rifle, stopping just short of actually touching it. "It's not loaded, of course."

"Of course not. But" — his voice dropped conspiratorially — "I've got ammo locked up in the desk. A man's entitled to a little target practice every now and again, right?"

Clayton nodded fractionally. His palms were sweating. Unaware, Beaumont went on in normal tones, "I'm glad you reminded me, though. Security will conduct a search of you and the others for contraband weapons. I realize you went through this on the ship, but you can never be too careful.

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Especially on this world." He eased the rifle lovingly back into its place of honor and clicked the case shut. "The first team had a bit of a rumble with the natives. One of the pteros got shot. For a while it looked like we'd get kicked off the planet, but fortunately things worked out. Just new regulations: no firearms except for security personnel, and no Terran weapons at all beyond the settlement's perimeters. We want to avoid trouble if we can."

"They let you keep your collection," Clayton observed.

Beaumont chuckled. "Rank hath its privileges. Besides, those seat warmers in Central don't realize what it's like for us on the frontier. We're mostly on our own out here. In a case like that, it never hurts for the natives to know what you're capable of. Let 'em know you're not helpless. Make 'em realize if they push, you can shove back hard. Understand?"

"Very well," Clayton said, with an expression nowhere near a smile. "My ancestors were American Indians."

"Oh? I didn't think any of you folk were around anymore." He patted the case, a bit self-consciously. "Well, I guess we'd better get you back for your tests."

The colonel hurried out, papers in hand. Clayton followed. He kept his face carefully blank, carefully turned away from the case and the piece of the future it held. From some dark cavern in the pit of his memory, he thought he heard a ptero, laughing.

* * *

The next morning a delegation of seventeen Chosen arrived, with them about thirty pteros. Clayton studied the reptiles with desperate, haunted eyes. The dream had struck again last night, so vivid he bolted awake with stinging lines of phantom pain along his arms and chest, as if he had been scored by claws. He had to find Allarn, and quickly, but there were so many pine-needle green pteros. Here one, at a nod from its Chosen partner, unfurled a wing for study by a pair of Terran zoologists; there another squatted before the settlement's church, with a curious blink or sniff at any Terran who passed by; above, a third pursued a lake-blue female in an aerial courtship dance. Any one of them could be Allarn. If Allarn even existed.

Clayton cursed softly under his breath. Maybe he should have confessed to Corinne, after all; two might find an answer where one could not. Well, there was still time. He searched the knots of Terrans and Chosen for his sister, and spotted her at last near the end of the street, talking with two men in Chosen leather. "Hi, Clayton!" she called cheerfully as he approached. "This is my brother, the one I told you about. Clayton, this is Hezekiah and his son, Jared, from the cliffs."

The three men sized each other up. Hezekiah's build was thick with muscles, his ginger hair and beard flecked with gray. He wore a long steel knife in his belt; his animal stance told Clayton he knew well how to use it. Clayton

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nodded curtly in greeting, and was not surprised when Hezekiah did not offer his hand. The younger, Jared, murmured something polite. The boy was in his early twenties, half a head taller than his father, cat lean, with a long mane of hair the color of a sunset and earnest gray eyes. He, too, wore a knife, in incongruous partnership with a wooden flute, slung in a loop at his left hip. "Been talking to your sister," Hezekiah said brusquely. "Heard you got questions."

Clayton kept his own voice neutral. "I'm a cultural anthropologist," he confirmed. The Chosen's face went blank. "I'm interested in the culture of a people — how they live, their religions, their myths, their history—"

"Ah. History." Hezekiah pounced on the word. "Then it's Daniel the Historian you want. Over there with Sala, under the trees. Watch him; he goes on for hours."

"Actually, what I'd like most right now is just to observe. If I could visit your cliffs—"

"No!" Hezekiah barked. His hand fell to his knife. Jared quickly laid his own hand over his father's. "It isn't permitted," he said, the gray eyes apologetic. "Our council forbids Terrans to come to the cliffs, except in rare instances. We prefer to keep our privacy."

"Then why ask us here?" Clayton started, then caught, beyond Hezekiah's shoulder, the expression darkening Corinne's face, daring him to make a scene. He shrugged. "O.K., so I'll talk to your historian. Better than nothing."

Hezekiah muttered something and shoved past Clayton, into the open street. Jared touched Clayton's arm briefly. "Please forgive my father; he has the temper of a rutting grazer. I'm sure the historian can help you."

"Yeah, maybe. Want to come along, sis?"

She glanced at Jared. "Maybe another time. I'm supposed to stay with the student group. See you at dinner, O.K.?"

"Sure." Clayton waved her on her way. She headed back into town proper; the Chosen youth fell in beside her, shortening his easy hunter's stride to match her smaller steps. For a moment Clayton followed them with a coldly smoldering stare; then he mentally laughed at his own brotherly paranoia. Corinne was a sensible girl; she knew better than to get involved with someone not of her own kind. Certainly not with someone not of her planet. Shrugging it off, he headed for the stand of trees at the edge of the settlement Hezekiah had pointed out.

"Daniel the Historian" turned out to be man much like Clayton himself: mid-thirties, coarse black hair, an amiable outward manner. "Sala," Clayton discovered, was a pert brown female ptero. She peered down at Clayton out of bright, amused eyes as he and Daniel shook hands. There was something wolfish in the historian's smile

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that put Clayton on his guard. "Welcome to the Nest," Daniel said. "History buff?"

"Culture buff," Clayton said, and explained his purpose. Daniel was amenable, and they settled on the grass to talk. The discussion began between the two men; soon Sala joined in, speaking through the historian, who passed her words along to Clayton. After over an hour Clayton paused to rest his throat, and realized with a start he'd been speaking exclusively to the ptero, the human relaying her comments all but forgotten. Clayton laughed aloud. "Daniel, I'm sorry; we kind of left you out. But damn! This bird's got some pointed observations."

Sala grinned and canted her head at Daniel. "Kindly tell your odd-smelling friend," Daniel dutifully translated, "that he shoud take time out to study some basic biology. Birds and reptiles are *not* interchangeable."

"You see what I mean? When I first saw the pteros, I thought — no, I won't tell you what I thought; she'll kill me. I didn't believe it at first, but there's a brain in that head. One that's got more smarts than a lot of people I know."

That remark brought out a chortle from the historian, and a low, throaty trill out of Sala. "Not all of 'em are like Sala," Daniel admitted. "Some pteros are, well, pretty stupid. But then, so are some people. For the most part, the pteros are brighter than I think you Terrans want to believe."

"And telepathetic. I wish I could hear her." He gazed up at Sala with a twinge of frustration. "That reminds me: I hear some of you Chosen have developed psi talents, like telepathy and telekinesis. Something like that, if it were widespread, would have to have some kind of impact on your way of life. What about it?"

The wolfish look hooded Daniel's eyes. Sala, oblivious to his masked expression, chirped a reply to Clayton. "Those are stories," Daniel said, "tales of dark native magic, that kind of bull. You know how these things start."

Sala barked sharply, her long neck rigid with anger. Daniel speared her with a look of warning. The air between them sizzled with their mental exchange, so powerful Clayton could almost hear the steaming hiss of their words. *What he told me isn't what she said. What's he trying to hide?*

"What's the problem here?" Drawn by Sala's rising screeches, Hezekiah thundered up. Sala shrilled her fury at him, her long tail smacking the ground. "No problem," Daniel said satinly, the wolf eyes guileless. "Sala and I had a minor disagreement over some historical point. It's time we were moving on, anyway. Maybe we can talk another time, Dr. Blackbear."

Clayton turned to Sala. Her shrieks had subsided to a hard, sustained rumble. He opened his mouth to speak to her, but Hezekiah seized his arm and led him away in a grip that brooked no argument. "You come with me, Ter-

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ran. I'll find someone better for you to talk to. That Daniel doesn't know his own tail from a ptero's."

He does talk quite a bit, doesn't he? Yet it's what he leaves unsaid that makes the difference. The voice broke the air like a spear of lightning, inside Clayton's head, all around him. The ptero squatting before the church had risen, and stood with beak pointed at Sala and Daniel, still arguing under the trees. It seemed to Clayton he smiled. *Sala sounds quite annoyed with him, though that's hardly anything new. What set her off this time?*

"Keep your beak out of it, Allarn," Hezekiah snapped. He tugged at Clayton. "Come along. What's the matter with you?"

Clayton gaped at the ptero. "Allarn? That's Allarn?"

"Huh? Him? Yes, his name's Allarn. Good-for-nothing—"

"Wait." Clayton struggled and, with effort, yanked himself free of the Chosen's grip. "I, uh, I just remembered, I left my tape recorder in my room. I wanted to tape some of these talks." His eyes locked with Allarn's. The reptile's gold orbs slitted; his tail undulated slowly across the bare ground, with soft snaps of the triangle tip. "I'll be out again later. Don't wait for me."

"Suit yourself." With an ugly snarl up at Allarn, Hezekiah left them. Man and ptero stared at each other. "Allarn," Clayton whispered.

So it's you, the ptero said softly. His voice held no surprise. *You can hear me, can't you?*

"Yes," Clayton admitted, dazed. "But how—"

Not here. Alarn lifted his head with studied casualness and yawned. Only the nervous skitter of his tail betrayed him. *There are too many others around, who'd ask how a Terran can hear a ptero's thoughts. We have to talk privately. Can you come out to the shuttle field at sunset?*

"I'll try." Clayton swallowed. "You were expecting me. How could you know?"

Another pretense of unawareness, this time an experimental stretch of a wing. He did not look directly at Clayton. *A dream,* he said, *a vision of things to come. I glimpsed a Terran of similar mind and talent, a timeseer like myself.* A pair of pteros winged overhead; Allarn fell silent until they were past. *Sunset,* he hissed. His wings slid open smoothly, and with two quick beats carried him skyward, leaving Clayton frozen in place before the church.

Allarn. A ptero with his own talent, able to see the future. The word Allarn had used chased itself inside Clayton's spinning head. *Timeseer.*

He looked down at his hands. They did not shake, as he had expected. The fingers were crooked, the arm muscles clenched, as if he held a gun.

The sky of New Eden flamed red-gold with the brilliant fire of sunset.

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The streets were all but empty, the townsfolk at their evening meals. A few pteros lingered on the main avenue, waiting for their riders. Clayton passed them without a glance, his eyes fixed on the dark conifer form squatting on the seared ground of the landing field. He wished, briefly, he'd told Corinne what he was up to, perhaps even brought her along. No, not yet; it was better to keep her safely out of this until he knew for certain what was happening.

Allarn lifted his head as Clayton approached, watching with wary eyes, not him, but the pteros in the town. At last his beak dipped once in a satisfied nod. *No trouble from them,* he said to Clayton. *They listen to nothing but their rumbling stomachs. We're far enough from the settlement proper; I don't think we'll be interrupted.*

Clayton settled on the ground cross-legged, beside one folded wing. "Don't the people mind?" he asked. "Pteros in their town, I mean."

How can they object? It's our Nest, not theirs. Allarn laughed low in his throat, a sound like a razor. Noticing Clayton's sharp expression, he let the laugh die away. *It's strange,* he said. *I knew you were coming to the Nest — I could almost see your face — yet I still don't know your name.*

"Clayton Blackbear." He automatically started to extend his hand, realized the ludicrousness of the gesture, and dropped the hand into his lap with a sheepish grin. The grin thinned out. "Why can I hear you? Just you, and no other ptero?"

I ... I'm not sure. Allarn's tail tip began to twitch. *You're Terran; you shouldn't be able to. Still ... our minds are much alike, possessed of similar talents. Something in yours is attuned to something in mine, so that my thoughts don't injure you.* He uttered an irritated growl. *Fagh. That's no answer. Perhaps it might be best to just accept.*

"You said you saw me in a dream."

I saw a Terran Timeseer. I didn't know it was you until you spoke. I've been waiting for you for, I don't know, for weeks now.

For weeks, Clayton thought. *Since my own dreams began?* "That term you used. Timeseer. What does it mean?"

Exactly what it sounds like. I can see time. Paths from the present, leading into the future. Or does yours work differently?

"Mine usually comes in dreams. I can hear, smell, feel things, like I'm actually there. Usually I have the same dream, occurring with increasing frequency until the event actually happens. Sometimes, too, I get waking flashes, either connected with the dream or with a person or thing I touch...." He thought of Corinne, the empty shuttle seat, and swallowed heavily. "What about you?"

I also see time in my dreams, but not often. The visions tend to come when I'm awake. Anything can set it

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off — a scent, a whispered word, a stone in the wrong place. Sometimes ... how many futures do your dreams show you? Only one, or several?

"Several?" Clayton was taken aback. "You see more than one?"

Allarn cocked his head and peered at him sideways. *You see only the one, without variations?* Clayton slowly nodded. *Your timesight is limited, then. Have you ever tried to change a future you've seen? Make it not happen at all?*

"No ... I haven't." It had never occurred to him that he *could* affect the future his dreams revealed to him. He had always accepted his visions as inevitable. "I see only one, and it always comes true. But you ... you can see multiple futures? You can change it ... them?"

At times. Sometimes I see two paths, or three, or five. By choosing one, or none of them, I negate the rest. Sometimes all paths led to the same future; it was that way with you. I stared down six different timepaths, and saw you at the end of all of them. There was nothing I could do except await your arrival. He chuckled. *I'll admit, you're not what I expected. I'm sure you feel the same. You foresaw my presence, didn't you? You must have; you knew my name. Tell me what happened in your dream.*

Clayton's skin went cool as ice, in spite of the sweltering air. What should he say? *I had a gun. I was going to kill you.* He shifted, uneasy, and noticed he was sitting beside the ptero's narrow foot, four-toed and armed with stiletto talons that could shred a man like paper. Allarn rumbled impatiently. "We were on a plain, at the edge of a forest. It was early evening, I think. I was ... I was...."

A flashlight beam slid over the ground and glided up to glare into Allarn's eye. The ptero blinked, hissing acidly under his breath. "What are you doing here?" Beaumont's voice called out of the twilight. It was salted with a vague contempt Clayton had heard in other voices over many years. The tone irritated him, and he got to his feet. Instantly the flashlight beam swung down to impale him. "You know the regulations," Beaumont snapped. "No natives within settlement perimeters after sunset—" The beam picked out Clayton's Terran clothing, moved up to light his face. Beaumont's attitude thawed accordingly. "Dr. Blackbear! Sorry. I thought you were one of the Chosen. Most of the researchers are at dinner right now."

"Yeah, well, uh, I came out for a bit of air — bad air, it turned out; really stinks, doesn't it? — and ended up in a delightful, though one-sided, talk with this fellow here." He patted Allarn's neck. The ptero sniffed. "Not exactly sparkling conversationalists, are they?"

Beaumont sniggered. The colonel kept his free hand near his beamer, and did not move any closer to Allarn than

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he had to. "Isn't it the truth. Big, stupid lizards. Pity to waste a planet on 'em, even if the air does smell bad." He tapped his gun and yelled at Allarn, "G'wan, you scat. Go home. We don't like these beasties around town too much, especially after dark. Makes people nervous. Go on, move!"

Allarn stretched himself sluggishly to his feet, the picture of a dim-minded reptile. His eyes swung down to meet with Beaumont's for an instant's regard ... and suddenly Clayton saw the misty image of a second ptero, veiling Allarn in ebony. The black ptero's eyes stabbed Beaumont with an electric surge of power. Beaumont staggered backward, mouth stretched in a scream as his brain first writhed and then collapsed before the awful telepathic force cannoned into it. Every nerve in his body flamed brilliant crimson against pallid skin — flamed, flared, and blackened; brain, nerves, and tissue crackling, burning—

Allarn eased his wings wide. The vision vanished, shattered by the movement. Beaumont backstepped hastily. "Watch yourself. They kick up quite a wind when they take off."

Shuddering, Clayton retreated. Allarn glanced his way, his gold eyes masked. *We must speak again, soon. There's too little time left before* — He cut himself off. *Don't seek me out; I'll find you. Above all, don't mention this to anyone.*

"Don't mention what? Why not?" But Allarn was airborne, streaking for the cliffs. If he heard Clayton's shouted questions, he chose not to answer.

"What? You talking to me?" Beaumont said. Deaf to Allarn's mental voice, he knew nothing of the ptero's parting admonition. "I think maybe you'd better come inside, Doctor," he added, with a faint hint of condescension. "You're right; the air's a little funny."

Clayton mumbled something and followed Beaumont back into town. *Don't mention this to anyone.* Why shouldn't he? What was Allarn afraid of? And what did that hallucination mean, the vision of the black ptero?

"Oh, hell, there's another one. They never listen. You go on in, Doctor." Beaumont abandoned him in the street and bore down with long, agressive strides on a single ptero lingering outside the prefab dining hall. The creature was a bony youngling, lush jungle green with a pale sandy blotch on its chest. A boy and girl murmured and laughed beneath the shelter of its wing. Beaumont pinned them with the flashlight beam and rapped out a command. The ptero hissed and snaked back its head to strike. Beaumont scrabbled out of reach, his beamer snapping into his hand as if by teleportation. At once the boy stepped forward, hands raised, mouthing placating words. The flashlight played across a lean, earnest face and brilliant sunset hair. At a gesture from the boy, the ptero bent for mounting, though its hisses were audible even at this dis-

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tance. The boy swung himself gracefully onto the reptile's back, and just had time to wave to the girl before the ptero's wings carried them up and out of the town, toward their own section of the Nest.

Now Beaumont lit into the girl. Her clothing was Terran, her voice, in hot rejoinder, loud ... and familiar. Clayton paused to listen. Was that really Corinne?

The two snapped at each other for several minutes. Clayton could not hear her words, but Corinne's rigid stance spoke loud as a shout. Before Beaumont could retort, she stepped pointedly around him and stalked, blade stiff, toward the dormitory. She had not seen Clayton, and started when he called her. "Cory? What was that about?"

"Oh, Clayton! That? Oh, nothing. Did you have dinner yet? I didn't see you."

"Forget dinner. You were with a Chosen."

"What of it?" Her voice went defensive. "It was only Jared; you met him this morning. He stayed to have dinner with me when you didn't show up, and we got talking...."

"I'll bet. Look, Cory, these people may be dangerous. I don't want you alone with any one of them."

"And how am I supposed to get any work done?"

"Stay with your group, or come to me. You don't need to deal with them one to one."

"Not even if I want to?"

What was this sudden anger in her, that fired her first against Beaumont and now him? "You do what I tell you, Corinne, or I'll have you shipped back to Earth. You hear me?"

Her face was sullen. "Loud and clear, big brother. Just like always." She turned her back on him and slammed into the dorm. Clayton, deserted, growled in his throat. What was wrong with her? His only wish was to protect her; he didn't like to be harsh. Why, after years of sensible obedience, would she choose to be difficult now?

This planet. It had to be this damned planet, where everything was wrong, setting Corinne on edge as it had Clayton from the start. But not for too much longer. When he met with Allarn again, he would solve the riddle of his dream; then he would get his sister safely back to Earth, out of reach of New Eden's claws forever.

Though he hunted among the pteros who came to the settlement, and though he kept himself highly visible within the confines of Terra's Nestian territory, Clayton did not see Allarn again for eight days. Nor did he see much of Corinne, busy as she was with her own work of delving psychologically into the minds of the alien Chosen — always in the presence of her group, he noted with satisfaction. Left to himself, he occupied his time with his own pursuit, the study of

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the Chosen culture.

They had accomplished much in a short time. Though primarily hunters, agriculture was not unknown to them; garden plots were common. Clayton spoke to herdsmen also, who tended domesticated bovine grazers and the shaggy Nestian goat. Art was little beyond the cave-painting stage, but they did have music, mournful airs based upon the Christian hymns of their forebears. Stories and poetry were passed along orally, usually by the historian or his apprentices; written communication, rendered obsolete by pteroan telepathy, had become extinct with the first generation. Government was by an elected Council of Elders, and each Elder represented a specialty: Herdsman, Weaver, Healer, Historian, others. All were men — white men, Clayton noted cynically. Not a surprising fact. Although there had been Negroids and other ethnic types among the original colonists, "God's Chosen" had been predominately Caucasoid, and even the Fever had not effected a racial balance. Like Earth, New Eden seemed to have fallen into the hands of the white man.

Man. Not pteros. Clayton found the reptiles rather dull — not stupid, surely, but in the main not particularly aggressive, certainly not all that curious, definitely not imaginative. They seemed content to let the humans make the decisions, run the government, carry the bulk of the cultural exchange with the Terrans. With the exceptions of Allarn and Sala, they were exactly what he first took them to be: no more than intelligent animals.

Unless there were others like Allarn and Sala, quietly kept hidden from the Terrans....

Alerted by this and other suspicions, he began to notice things. How no one, from a pair of visiting Elders to the simple herdsmen, would discuss the rumor of psychic talents among their people. How Daniel the Historian always seemed to be elsewhere when Clayton wished to speak with him. How Sala had not returned since that first morning. Or perhaps was kept from returning. Beneath the Chosen's veneer of friendliness, he found a furtive hostility. Their smiles were for the surface only, their amity gone the instant the Terrans turned their backs. Though he lacked Corinne's knack for reading people, Clayton sensed a society afraid, a people who had fled Earth only to find her once again on their doorstep — Earth who smiled and promised peace, yet who always came armed. The Chosen would be helpless in a fight, and knew it. They could only watch the Terrans, waiting for the inevitable hostilities, waiting.

That above all struck Clayton about them: the feeling of expectation, anticipation, as if something that would save them was on the way, something still in the future. Even the uncomplex pteros had it, an infection caught from their riders. Something was coming, not yet, but soon, soon.

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So the Chosen smiled to the Terrans, made them welcome since they could not drive them away, traded knowledge for knowledge ... and waited.

Clayton.

Startled, Clayton looked up and saw the wide-winged speck of a ptero circling high overhead. *The shuttle field. Sunset.* The speck broke its circle and arrowed away.

Allarn. The ptero who, like Clayton, saw the future. Perhaps he knew the Chosen's secret and had foreseen an answer to it.

Tonight at sunset, Clayton vowed, he'd have that answer, too.

New Eden's gold-red sun had already dipped beneath the line of trees by the time Clayton managed to slip from the dining hall and escape to the landing field. Allarn was there already, a thick green silhouette against the indigo sky. His tail slid gently back and forth across the harsh sere grass. Clayton sensed none of the waiting in him that so shrouded the Chosen and their pteros. Every line of Allarn's stance bespoke an aura of decision. For Allarn, the waiting was done.

The ptero greeted Clayton with an easy bow of his neck. *I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you sooner. I've been busy, asking questions. I hear you've been doing the same, probing the Chosen and their history.*

Clayton took a seat on the ground beside Allarn's wing. "It's my job. When I go back to Earth, I've got to have something to show for it. Not that I got that much. You're a closed-mouth bunch."

Pity. I've been more successful. I've learned quite a bit about Earth from Daniel, and from the Terrans themselves. They're a loose-tongued people in front of us pteros; they don't think we can understand. A set of muscles along his neck corded and relaxed, like a human fist. *Terra still considers the Nest its colony. What are the chances they might try to reclaim this hatchling of theirs?*

Waiting. "You're afraid of invasion, is that it?"

We have treaties with them, but—

"Treaties." Clayton snorted the word, as if Allarn had told him a very poor joke. "We had treaties with them, too. You can wipe your tails with their treaties. That's about all they're good for."

Allarn regarded him in silence for a moment. *They,* he said at last. *Always "they" to you. Aren't you Terran yourself?*

"Just a technicality. Ask your historian about Terra's history of racism and white supremacy someday. Find out what he knows about Indians."

I don't understand.

"No? No, I guess you wouldn't. Race doesn't seem to mean as much here. I sure haven't seen any pteros oppressed because of the color of their skin." He snickered. "Guess you don't have any black pteros, do you?"

Allarn's reaction startled him: the

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bunching of neck muscles, the twitch of wing-claws, the sudden stillness of his tail. His voice trembled, low and wire-taut. *A black ptero ... is extremely rare., There's only one at the cliffs now, Pelli, though two of her offspring are very dark.* He abandoned the subject before Clayton could speak. *Tell me about these "Indians."*

"They're called 'Natives Americans' or 'Amerinds' now. They'd already settled North and South American when the Europeans 'discovered' the New World." He warmed easily to the topic, his life. "My people were Shawnee. We populated the Northwest Territory, what became Ohio and Kentucky and the Great Lakes regions. I think it must have looked a lot like this, green forests, hills, river valleys. The hunting was rich there. Buffalo — something like your grazers — deer, elk, bear ... we shared with the Delawares and Miamis and Wyandots, the tribes who loved and respected the land as much as we did. Until the white men took it away from us."

Allarn scraped the ground with a set of foot-claws. *You didn't fight?*

"Of course we fought," Clayton snarled. "For all the good it did. They had us outgunned and outnumbered. They forced us clear across the continent until we couldn't go any farther, then penned us up on reservations." He felt his voice shaking. "Fight? We should have fought, down to the last warrior. Better extinction than life in a government cage."

Extinction, Allarn said thoughtfully. He gazed out over the forest, in the direction of the pteros' cliffs. *What became of your people?*

The fever slowly ebbed from Clayton's face. He gouged out a clump of earth with his heel. "We survived. In the white man's world. What else could we do? Survived with the memory of what we had and what we were, knowing we could never reclaim it. Maybe that's why...." He sighed. "When Earth perfected spaceflight and started colonizing, the Indians left. All the tribes that remained, most of the populations. Packed up and moved on to try to start over."

But not you.

"They were wrong!" he burst out. He groped for words to explain. "They should never have given up like that. The white man took our world away, but it was still *ours.* Our — our Nest."

His voice broke, ceased. Allarn's tail, still throughout his story, resumed its gentle weaving. The ptero released a long, low hiss of a sigh. *Then you do understand. Good.* Abruptly he hopped to his feet and crouched low, broadside, in front of Clayton. *Get on my back. I want to show you something.*

Puzzled, Clayton complied. His knees clamped tight to the ptero's neck in momentary panic as Allarn took to the air. The ground flashed dizzily past. Bent low to avoid Allarn's bony headcrest, Clayton shouted, "Where are we going?"

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Not far. I just want to approach the settlement from the direction of the cliffs.

Allarn banked, and the world tilted sideways. Clayton hugged the reptile's neck with legs and arms. Allarn swung round and stretched his wings to level off. *Look down, Clayton. Tell me what you see.*

Clayton leaned over Allarn's neck and looked. The settlement had become a toy village: dark, block, native wood constructions side by side with the wide, cylindrical prefab buildings used by the Terrans, the silver material painted pale rose by the rising moon. The church spire slashed the sky like a sword. Allarn angled lower. Clayton rubbed his eyes. The wind bit at them with acid teeth, blurring his sight, blurring—

— shimmers of heat blurring the daylit street, the exhaust of many ships. Six shuttles crowded the landing field; others circled, vulturelike, waiting their turn to land. In the street itself men kicked up dust, troops in service uniform, armed with heavy guns. A squad at one of the shuttles was unloading a laser cannon.

Clayton cried out. Allarn snapped left, breaking his view of the settlement. He sped back to the landing field and touched down hastily, bare seconds before Clayton slid off his neck. The man's hands clawed into the turf, gouging long wounds in the earth, tearing out strips of seared grass. The hot, slimy stench of the overturned ground gagged him. He choked, gratefully, focusing his being on this and not the vision. When his nostrils finally cleared and he warily opened his eyes, New Eden's night, the present, lay comfortably around him.

Allarn prodded Clayton gently with his beak, then offered his tail for support so he could rise. "Timevision," Clayton gasped. "Shuttles on the field ... soldiers...."

So you can see it, too. I first saw it several weeks ago. Since then I've seen it many times, always when I fly over town from that direction.

By now Clayton had regained his feet; he released Allarn's tail. "It looked like part of an army. What were — what will they be here for?"

You know what they want as well as I do. They'll come to reclaim their colony. They want the Nest.

"By military force? But—" No. As Clayton knew from his own history, that was all too possible. "That's just one vision. Maybe there's an alternative, another future. maybe—"

Don't you think I looked for it? Allarn roared. *Ever since that first vision, I've been searching the timepaths. The Terrans will come; that much is certain. Beyond that....*

"How much time before...?"

I'm not sure. I'm guessing at years, perhaps as few as five, as many as twenty. His tail thrashed rapidly over the grass. *There's still a chance.*

His voice had taken on the hint of knives, a tone that stirred ghosts out of

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a vision, the remembered mad voice from a dream. "A chance for what?" Clayton asked.

Life. Survival for my people. I've seen only five possible futures for us. Four are unthinkable, and the fifth.... His gaze strayed away from Clayton, out over the trees, finally rounding back to alight on the settlement. *If you had a weapon, one that could destroy you as well as your enemies, but was the only way to save your people from extinction ... would you use it? Would you let another use it?*

Those words, once dreamed, now actually spoken, washed over his in a wave of déjà vu. His legs trembled, threatening to spill him onto the ground again. "Whatever you've got, it won't be enough. Earth has too many resources. Stolen guns, even beamers—"

Guns! Allarn spat. *We of the Nest don't fight with guns. We have weapons you can't conceive of. Have you heard the rumors of strange psi powers among the people of the cliffs? They're true.*

"I think I'd already guessed that," Clayton said. It explained the Chosen's vehement refusal to allow Terrans into the cliffs. "So the Chosen intend to fight, after all. They'd better have a hell of lot more than telepathy with a bunch of lizards."

Oh, we have more — both of us, Chosen and pteros. Telepathy's only a small part of it. Empaths like Pelli, healers like her bondsman Benjamin, telekinetics, myself, a timeseer — the psigifts the Chosen have, we share. Powers undreamed of by the Terrans — wasted on animal minds!

The fury in the ptero's voice flamed through Clayton's mind. Allarn's tail writhed savagely behind him, as if possessed by a rage of its own. *Let me tell you about my people, Clayton. The Terrans call us animals, and they're right. Less than six generations ago, we were little more than beasts — capable of mindspeech, yes, but without imagination or dreams, and no thoughts beyond the now ... until the Chosen came.*

As the Fever altered the Chosen, so the Chosen altered us. The stimulation of their acclimated minds in turn awakened powers within the pteros. Psi powers in both species developed simultaneously, but the powers of the pteros are far stronger. Still, all that would slide out of our grasp if we didn't have human minds to goad us. Do you think we'd have allowed the Terrans on the Nest in the first place if we hadn't needed them? We need your minds to prod us, your ability to dream to guide us, until we can grow and fly on our own mental wings. But it's taking too long. Sala, Pelli ... so few of us with minds that can dream beyond today. If the Terrans strike before we're ready, we'll lose even that.

"Maybe ... maybe that wasn't an invasion force we saw. Security problems — troop training. It could have nothing to do with—"

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You saw their weapons. They're a hungry race, eager to expand. They will come, to take the Nest.

"Not necessarily. The Nest is huge; this little bit is the only settled area. You could share—"

The way they "shared" with your people? We learned how Terrans "share" from our historian. Our Terran historian. Daniel was born on your Earth, Clayton — or did he fail to mention that? He leaves out so many little details, such as that plan of his to save the Nest. Do you know what they're doing, out there at the cliffs? They're creating the weapon that will put them on equal footing with the Terrans. They're breeding themselves a telepath.

"So what? You're all telepathic, between yourselves and the Chosen."

And you think that's the extent of it? Think again. We had a telepath once, one of the first pteros to develop a psi talent. His name was Sashi. Maybe you heard what happened to him. The Terrans shot him through the head and called it an accident, because they feared his power. He could hear their walled-off Terran minds as easily as you hear me. And worse, for them: he could kill by thought. Would you let a menace like that survive in a land you considered your own? Oh, how they apologized, signed treaties with us, agreed to restrict the use of their weapons — after all Sashi was dead. Only the fear that other Telepaths like him exist keeps the people here from moving against us.

"But there aren't," Clayton said, "yet."

Allarn chittered. *You have a quick mind. It's Daniel's plan to create a supertelepath by breeding Sashi's line to Pelli's, combining the potential of two of the most powerful psionic talents on the Nest. Sashi sired two clutches before they murdered him, you see. I hatched from one of them. The weapon is here, in our blood and our genes. In me.*

An obsidian mist seemed to coalesce about Allarn, condensing into an ebon pterodactylian form. "The black petro," Clayton whispered.

Allarn squawked in astonishment. *You've seen even that?*

"In my vision, and sometimes when I look at you. I saw—"

Eyes. Fierce golden eyes that glittered as Allarn's glittered now. "He'll be insane."

Yes.

The world spun crazily for a moment; with effort Clayton forced it to right itself. This was the Allarn he remembered, the mad creature in his nightmare. "You know that? And you'd still—"

Ask yourself this, Clayton: If by some miracle we beat the Terrans back, who will rule the Nest in their place? The pteros? Hardly. They haven't the brains to see beyond their evening meal. It's the Chosen who will take control — the arrogant human Chosen, who in their — benevolence

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— will happily keep us animals, to serve them with our powers, rather than helping us achieve the heights I've seen us reach. And those brainless lizards will let them, because they can't see what our dependency is doing to us! Yes, I want the Terrans stopped, and the Chosen as well. I want vengeance.

"Vengeance," Clayton echoed. His heart thudded like blows from a hammer.

Vengeance. Yes. Allarn laughed, a clawing sound that scraped down Clayton's spine. *For my father, whose death the Chosen allowed to go unpunished, so that more Terrans would come to the Nest. For the Terran invasion, whenever that will be. And especially against the Chosen. They never asked for my cooperation in their breeding scheme. They* ordered *me to mate with one of Pelli the Empath's daughters. They ordered* me! His tail coiled tight, then cracked like a whip, and he laughed again, a thrusting of knives. *Well, let them order all they like; they'll get what they deserve. They think they'll be able to control this weapon they're forging. They're wrong. He'll be strong, and his hatchlings will be strong, with minds that can think, and dream. No human — not Terran, not Chosen — will ever have the Nest.* He *will see to that. The Nest belongs to the pteros, and I intend to see we keep it.*

"But what about the humans here? Suppose they don't want to go along with your telepath's plans?"

Then they'll die, as well as any ptero who doesn't choose to follow him. I told you, I saw only five futures. In four the pteros either died or regressed to animals. In the fifth, he *lived. I saw him when I gazed upon Pelli's daughter, Nira, just as you see him when you look at me. The weapon the Chosen want, and the Nest's salvation.*

"And your vengeance."

And what would you have done, given this choice? I heard the hatred in your voice when you spoke of the white men who stole your world. You can't tell me you wouldn't welcome a chance to strike back at them. Fierce hisses boiled from Allarn's throat. *You can't stop me.*

He had heard those words in the vision, too, but knew now the response to them. His legs, no longer traitors, held him erect as he met Allarn's eyes. "I think I can. You think so, too, or you wouldn't have sought me out and told me this." Allarn did not move, did not blink. "So what happens now? Are you going to kill me?"

Don't be absurd. That would stir up more trouble than I need. You can't stop me, but you could make things difficult. Five possibilities still exist. When I mate with Nira, there will be only one. Nothing must interfere with that one special future.

"So you want me to—"

Do nothing. Say nothing that might alert the Chosen, or fan the Terran's fears. I want them both unsus-

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pecting, until he hatches and makes them pay for what they're going to do.

Clayton's hands balled into fists. He found he could no longer meet Allarn's eyes. "I never told you my dream."

You don't have to. My own dreams foretold your arrival. You were pointing a gun at my head. All the blood seemed to drain from Clayton's body, leaving him strengthless again. *Time brought us together for a purpose. It brought you here to kill me.*

"Maybe not. I don't know. In the dream I never pulled the trigger. I always—" He always hesitated, and the black ptero struck, claws dancing cruelly across his body, leaving long bloody trails. "No. I can't let you bring that thing into the world. There has to be another way, negotiation, compromise—"

I saw what I saw. Five futures. No others. Though I despise them, I will not let my race sink back into bestiality. No one knows what the blood of Sashi and Pelli will ultimately unleash, except me ... and you. I've made my choice. Make yours.

Head low, eyes thin, wary slots, Allarn backed away from him and without warning vaulted for the sky. The stabbing light of a flashbeam traced his course. Three security men sprinted up, one with the flashlight, two with drawn guns, though there was little they could do now.

Clayton mumbled vague apologies as the trio escorted him back to town. Yes, he was fine, the beast had not attacked. Yes, he had spotted it on the landing field; he was curious about the creature, that was all. Yes, he knew the regulations about pteros on the grounds after dark. No, he would not fail to report it next time. Yes, he would keep his distance from unaccompanied pteros in the future. No, he doubted the beast would come back. But he would, Clayton knew. They had to meet again; Time demanded it. Or was Allarn right, could certain futures be changed?

His palms felt the cold, slick stock of a gun. He scrubbed them furiously against his pants.

Clayton went directly to the dormitory and headed for his room. After his unsettling talk with Allarn, company was the last thing on his mind. Yet he found his feet carrying him past his own door and around a corner of the hall, toward Corinne's room. Well, why not? He hadn't seen her for days, and talking with her always soothed him. He quickened his steps.

Strains of music, unexpected, surprised him in the hallway: the low mellow trill of a flute, the contralto echo of a girl's soft laughter. The music poured through a door left ajar at the far end of the hall. Corinne's door.

He stole to the door on silent feet and peered through the crack. Corinne sat cross-legged on the bed with Jared, the red-haired Chosen youth. The boy

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held a wooden flute to his lips; from it flowed a slow and wistful melody, its melancholia touched with hopeful poignancy, a love song. Corinne listened with glowing eyes and a tender smile.

Slamming the door open, Clayton burst into the room. The boy sat stunned, but Corinne leaped off the bed and hurried to her brother, explanations stumbling from her lips. Clayton thrust her aside and seized Jared by the arm and dragged him off the bed. The boy tumbled onto the floor; his flute clattered loudly beside him. Clayton hauled him roughly to his feet. "Get out," he snarled. "If I catch you even looking at my sister again, I'll break your neck."

Jared simply blinked at him, the earnest gray eyes startled but empty of fear or anger. He aimed his gaze past Clayton. "Corinne—"

Clayton thrust him out the door and crashed it shut, then spun on Corinne. She had picked up Jared's flute and held it tight against her breast, like a charm against evil. Her face was stiff and expressionless, though violence lay chained within her eyes. "And as for you," Clayton barked, "I thought I ordered you to stay away from him."

Corinne's lips twisted in an unfamiliar way that made her ugly. "Don't like me consorting with the natives, huh? I thought you of all people would've been sympathetic to the noble savages."

Her uncharacteristic acerbity only fanned Clayton's rage to greater heat. "That's it, the fling's over. When the next Earth ship comes by, you're going home on it. I shouldn't have let you come here in the first place." His searing glare blasted the flute in her hands. "I assumed you had more sense than to get sentimental over these aliens, but you were always the family romantic. I should have—"

"Stood guard over me? Locked me up in my room after hours? Pity you couldn't find somebody to rig up a chastity belt."

"That's enough, Corinne."

"Don't deny it, Clayton. I've always been able to see through you like a window ... even if I forced myself to pull the blinds once in a while. I know your plans for Little Sister: lock her up, hide her from the evil of the white man's world, until you get her safely married off to one of her own kind."

"And the sooner the better, if you ask me. For years I've watched you turning white inside. You're forgetting what it means to be Indian."

"Indian? You mean like you?" Agony shrilled in her voice. "Mired in the past, grousing how the whites did this and that and how wonderful our people were? If you were so fond of our people and the old ways, you could have gone off planet with the rest, maybe started a colony grounded in the old beliefs the way they did, anything to keep us together and keep our culture alive. But not you, Clayton Blackbear! You stayed on Earth and

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stewed in your own bigotry until it's all you can feel. If that's what it means to be Indian, then I'd rather be white, or Chosen, or even a ptero, than end up a twisted, pathetic thing like you, with nothing in me but hate!"

Without thought, Clayton flung his arm back and swung his open palm at her face. The blow knocked her backward onto the bed. The ringing, meaty crack of flesh against flesh hit Clayton like ice water, and he stared in sickened horror at the crumpled form of his sister. "Cory! Oh my God, Corinne, I'm so sorry—"

She jerked herself out of his reach. Her eyes squinting with captive tears, she bolted past him, flung open the door, and fled from him down the hall. The flute lay abandoned on her bed, empty of its music.

"Damn," Clayton muttered. Damn this fucking world! Trapped in unwanted solitude, Clayton trudged back to his room.

Though Clayton stalked it for over an hour, sleep evaded him, darting into hiding behind memories of the madness in Allarn's words, the raw, open wound of Corinne's eyes. Since he couldn't sleep, and because he refused to think of his sister, he focused his thoughts upon Allarn. Five futures for the Nest. Was he telling the truth? Why couldn't Clayton see them?

Perhaps, he mused, because he'd never tried. He had always waited, passively, for a dream to show him a future. Suppose he actively searched, as Allarn did, tried to see along the time lines....

He lay still on his bed, breathing deeply, deeply, calm, mind cleared of all distractions. Allarn was the focal point in time. He pictured the scene at the forest's edge, Allarn before him, himself with the rifle. This time he did not hesitate. He fired. Allarn crashed at his feet, shot through the brain.

Now. Reach beyond that moment, into the future. See into time....

He stood before the red sandstone cliffs that housed the Chosen and their pteros. Terrans strode purposefully here and about, on errands, giving orders. They had burned out a landing field at the edge of the clearing for their skimmers. The Terrans wore uniforms and hardlight beamers. The Chosen went weaponless, naked even of knives. Clayton raised his eyes from them to scan the cliffs. Pteros crouched before cave mouths or stretched like lazy cats on top of the cliffs, drinking in the sun. That much remained unchanged. And yet — he peered closer. Some spark in them, a spontaneity, had been bred or burned away. Dull-eyed beasts, they existed in service to their Chosen masters, who in their turn served the Terrans. There were more humans than pteros on New Eden now. He did not see many hatchlings.

Without warning a second future crowded out the first. Fires, explosions. The Nest was at war. Eager for territory, Earth moved in to conquer.

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The Chosen fought, were outmanned, outweaponed, defeated. The pteros did not, could not surrender. Driven by instinct to defend their Nest, they fought on, fought to their deaths. A few escaped, scattered to plains and high mountains, there to die or else devolve to the primitive mental state of their reptile ancestors.

A third future: Chosen and pteros utterly destroyed, Terran starships hovering in orbit, ready to reclaim and reshape New Eden in Earth's image. A fourth: dazzled by Terran promises of technological riches, the Chosen themselves turned on their reptile partners. Most willingly acquiesced to the humans' demands of obedience. A few, the dreamers among them, resisted. There was blood. The Terrans stepped in to aid their Chosen allies. Sickened, Clayton tore his stare away from the slaughter, to face—

The fifth future.

The ptero's eyes were nova gold, his hide the black of hate. That spark, which separated beast from near-human, burned inferno bright within him. And power as well: the end result of the Chosen's breeding scheme, he was the weapon they had waited for, a telepath, able to hear the walled-away thoughts of the Terrans, able to kill with his mind. A mind gone mad.

The Terrans moved against the Chosen in their bid for conquest. The telepath turned his basilisk eyes upon the Terrans, and they died, minds aflame, brains charred to ash. The Chosen tried to command him, and he turned on them like a two-edged sword, killing them as rapidly as he had their enemies. Realizing too late just what they'd unleashed, Chosen and pteros together tried to stop him. The telepath laughed at their efforts, laughed as he withered their brains in their skulls. They were nothing to him. The welfare of the Nest was not his concern; his only concern was himself. He had no human scruples to hamper him; what he did have was intelligence enough to breed ambition, the imagination to fire that ambition, and the power to turn into reality any mad dream he might envision.

Power enough, perhaps, to conquer a world.

Clayton jolted awake, corpse-cold, his throat choked by an unvoiced scream. Those eyes, those hellish eyes—

No. A dream. Only a dream.

If Allarn had his way, reality.

Well, why not? Let the monster hatch. Give the Chosen what they're asking for, and let Earth know what it's like to feel a conqueror's claws. Let every human on New Eden suffer in the name of racial supremacy!

No. What was he thinking of? He couldn't let Allarn's horror come into being. But the alternative, the death of the pteros, a race either wiped out or enslaved ... there had to be another way, a sixth future, something he and Allarn had both overlooked, something his tired mind refused to see.

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Corinne. Of course, Corinne. She'd help him. He would go to her, plead forgiveness, tell her all about his dream and Allarn's insane scheme. Maybe together they could find a way out.

He glanced at the clock, and yelped in surprise. Either he'd slept, or the timevisions had gone on longer than he thought; the night was all but gone, with only an hour of darkness left before sunrise. Corinne would be in her room. He would go to her at once, and end these nightmare glimpses of a future that must not be.

You can't stop me.

"Don't bet on it," Clayton growled, and left to see Corinne.

Her room was empty, the bed unslept in. When a frantic search and questioning of sleepy neighbors revealed no clues, Clayton rushed outside, intending to alert security. The first sight that met him stopped him cold. Six armed security men stood guard in a loose semicircle around a crouching ptero. The reptile hissed and switched its tail, but would not abandon its post. The skittish thrusts of the guards' flashbeams picked out the jungle green of its hide and the wan, sandy blotch on its chest.

Jared the Chosen's ptero. Crouched in vigil in front of the medical building.

Cory!

Things blurred: men's shouts, a ptero's squawk, bodies shouldered roughly aside. Clayton rammed through the guards into the building and grabbed the first person he encountered, a nurse. "My sister," he gasped. "Corinne Blackbear. Is she here? Is she—"

Then he saw Jared, ramrod stiff on a folding chair outside a door marked "Private." The boy clutched his flute in his hands with white-knuckled intensity.

Clayton dashed to the door, oblivious to the nurse's shrills of protest, and thrust himself inside.

Corinne lay on a cot in the middle of the tiny room, a sheet tugged up to her shoulders, her back to him. Clayton knelt beside the cot. At his touch she stirred with a little sigh and turned.

The stink of acid smote him in the face — acid in her skin, her breath, her hair that once had smelled of flowers. Her eyes focused on Clayton's features; the joy in them, meant for another gave way to a kind of horror. "C-Clayton? But ... I asked them not to tell you, not right away...."

"Corinne...." His hands crawled away from the alien feel of her. Within him, slow rage began to kindle. "How could you do this? Don't you realize — do you have any idea what you've done to yourself? Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you—"

Corinne cried out and shrank away from him, like a delicate flower before a blast of poisonous air. Clayton stared, dumbfounded by her violent reaction. "Don't," she whimpered. "You *hurt*. I didn't know it would

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be like this...."

"Get away." Jared shoved himself between Clayton and Corinne, a buffer against Clayton's anger. He smiled to Corinne. "Don't be frightened, beloved, the pain will not last. We have others like you at the cliffs, Pelli and some of her hatchlings. They'll teach you how to block it out. You'll enjoy life among us, you'll see. Rest now, and regain your strength. We'll leave whenever you're ready."

"No." Clayton tried to push Jared away, but the boy stood granite firm between him and his sister. "You're not taking her anywhere. I won't let you."

With unexpected strength, Jared gripped Clayton's arms and forced him back, away from Corinne. His voice was low and saber-edged, the gray eyes no longer earnest, but hard as stone. "Leave her alone. She's chosen her own path. She's Nestian now. She belongs with us."

Clayton's voice, and his anger, rose as he struggled. "Let go of me, you slimy alien—"

Corinne moaned in agony. Jared pinned Clayton to the wall. "Stop it! Can't you see you're hurting her?" The Chosen's eyes widened, then narrowed to lines of disbelief. "In the name of God, are you that blind?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Use your eyes, Terran! Your sister is empath; she thrives on emotion. The Fever unlocked her full gift, but she can't control it yet. She feels your anger as physical pain. If you can't control yourself, then leave. I won't let you hurt her further."

Empath? Corinne? "I wouldn't hurt her. She's my sister. I love her."

Jared bared his teeth. "Do you really, Terran? Is that why you kept her penned away from the world, with only your twisted emotions to sustain her? Your 'love' would have destroyed her, given time. I offered her my heart, and a life she could share. Do you blame her for choosing to live?"

Corinne — Clayton stared past Jared to where his sister lay, huddled under the sheet like a doe in pain. As he watched, she turned, but her eyes avoided his, and the name she murmured was Jared's. The boy released Clayton and went to her side. Her hand sought his and clasped it hard, her face alight, alive, in a way Clayton had never seen in her before. His beautiful little sister, Corinne. Lost to him, forever.

Blind-eyed, Clayton made his way out of the med building, into the street, away from the guards and the skittish ptero, alone. The acid air bit his nose and eyes. It had to be the alien air that made his eyes sting so.

Clayton?

The voice touched his mind, soft with distance, concern. He raised his head slowly to glare at the sky, fresh anger flaming inside him. Overhead, the shape of a hovering ptero blotted out the stars. "Allarn," he grated. "Did you foresee this, too?"

I can't see every little thing. I no-

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ticed Conna — Jared's partner — and questioned him. I had no idea your sister would take the Fever.

"Or you'd have warned me? Well, maybe you would have. After all, I'm the only thing standing between your race and survival." His rage erupted, possessed him, clenching his hands, tightening his jaw, stretching a sneer on his lips. "You want vengeance? I'll show you what vengeance is. This world of yours is going to pay for what it did to my sister."

Allarn hovered, as if about to speak, then drove his wings down and sped away. "Go ahead, run," Clayton snarled. "I'll only hunt you down. My visions do come true, Allarn. Always."

To kill a ptero, Clayton knew he'd need a powerful weapon. A hardlight beamer such as the guards carried, fired at close range, might do it. But there was a better choice. He sauntered across the street as casually as his pounding heart would permit, toward the building that housed Beaumont's office.

The door, of course, was sealed. Clayton was trying to think of a way to break in when a young guard hailed him. "The colonel's not in yet, sir," he said, "but he should be along shortly. Can I help you with anything?"

"Yes," Clayton said, "You can." He drove his fist into the guard's stomach. As the boy doubled over, Clayton ripped his beamer from its holster and clouted the guard over the head with it. The boy groaned and fell to the floor. Clayton ignored him and shot off the doorseal. The hardlight weapon, efficient though it was, felt clumsy to him, wrong in his hands. No matter. He wouldn't need it for long.

He shouldered open the smoking door. The weapons case filled his eyes, waiting for him. Gripping the beamer's barrel in both hands, he hammered the glass with the butt. The glass splintered; the shards hit the tiled floor with a harsh accusational clinking. Clayton reached carefully into the case. The projectile rifle seemed to detach itself and fall into his eager hand of its own accord. Now: ammunition. In the colonel's desk.

Clayton heard the door creep back, and jerked up his beamer to cover it. Colonel Beaumont filled the doorway, his own weapon in his hand. The colonel's mouth twitched at the sight of Clayton's gun, but no other sign betrayed fear. His voice was similarly even. "I thought I saw someone come in here. You the one clobbered poor Griswold?"

"Drop that gun," Clayton said in a steady, deadly tone. After a second's hesitation, Beaumont shrugged and tossed away his beamer. "Get in here and shut the door," Clayton rapped. The colonel obeyed. Clayton waved the rifle. "Where's the ammo for this?"

"You're in a lot of trouble already, Dr. Blackbear. Don't add to it. You put those down, and I'll see if I can make things easy for you."

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"Easy for me?" Clayton tittered. "Easy for you. If you knew what I was up to, you'd hand me those bullets with your blessing. You whites are a greedy bunch; you like to take. You won't have to take New Eden. I'll give it to you, Colonel, on a silver platter. Now tell me where the ammo is."

He jabbed the beamer at Beaumont for emphasis. "It's in my desk," Beaumont said quietly. "The drawer is locked. I'll get it."

"Sure. What else is in there, Colonel? A loaded pistol? Another beamer? Tell me which drawer."

"You're not going to make it out of the settlement, you know. You won't even get out of this building."

"Which drawer?"

Beaumont sighed. "Left side, bottom. Dr. Blackbear, whatever's wrong, there's no need for this. We can talk."

"O.K. I'll come back when I'm done. We can talk about conquerors." He burned out the lock on the indicated drawer and yanked it open. Eyes fixed to Beaumont, he fumbled in the drawer, among the boxes of antique ammunition. His fingers knew the right box the instant they brushed across it. He drew it out, flicked a peek at the contents to make sure, then stuffed the box into his pants pocket. "Move away from the door."

Beaumont edged to one side. Clayton weighed the beamer in his palm, then hurled it at Beaumont, a deliberately high throw. As the Colonel ducked reflexively, Clayton dashed to the door and flung himself through. Two guards crouched in the corridor, guns ready. Clayton charged them, bulldozing one into a wall, clubbing the other with the rifle. He knew better than to head for the front door; instead, he fled farther into the building. Behind him he heard the clump of boots, and Beaumont shouting orders.

He found an unlocked office and slipped inside, then out again through a window and into a narrow alley. A guard saw him, shouted. Another fired. Clayton snapped the rifle to his shoulder. The guards, believing the weapon loaded, instantly dove for cover. Shots spit after him as he emerged from the alley and raced for the forest; hardlight kicked divots of dirt and sere grass from the earth. A beam scraped his thigh, burned his clothing, flamed in a fiery line on his flesh. He kept running, through clawing underbrush, into the protection of the forest. Only when he'd left the din of the settlement behind did he slow his flight and jog to a stop.

His right thigh ached and he walked with a bit of a limp, but none of that mattered now. What mattered was that he was free, and would stay free. Sure, there would be ground and air patrols. The Chosen would even join in. They would not find him, for his timevision guaranteed his safety. Time ensured he would not be captured, not

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until he confronted Allarn and fulfilled the prophecy of his dream.

He sat awhile, to get his breath and load the rifle. He was no longer doubtful, no longer confused. Allarn was right; he could alter his visions as well as accept them. In the dream he never fired. Reality would be different.

Clayton rose gingerly, favoring his right leg. Rifle in hand, he stepped boldly into the forest, confident that Time would direct him to where he had to go.

Morning gave way to afternoon; now the lowering sun grudgingly gave up the sky to early evening. Clayton paused at the forest's edge, panting for breath and scrubbing his hand against the ache in his thigh. His other hand maniacally gripped the projectile rifle. That last foot patrol had come too close to his hiding place; if not for the warning of his timesight, he would have blundered right into them. He stared up at the purpling sky. Their efforts were for nothing. He was here, at the place of his dreams. It would not be long now.

Warned by prescience, he cocked his head to the left. He heard the patrol before he saw it: six pteros, six armed riders. Clayton ducked back into the forest and waited for them to pass. They were the last. After them—

The Chosen patrol glided overhead, flapped to the east, was gone. Clayton stepped out from beneath the trees. A movement to the right caught his eye and he whirled, the rifle swinging in a fluid arc to his shoulder. Allarn, wings folded, head ducked to avoid the branches, shuffled awkwardly from his hiding place, not ten feet away.

I heard about the theft, he said. *I thought I'd save you the trouble of searching for me at the cliffs.* His gold eyes, devoid of any fear, passed over the rifle to rest on Clayton's face. *I see you've made your choice.*

"Yeah. Thanks for making it so easy for me."

Indeed? You find it easy to condemn a race to death?

"I suppose your way's better."

My way at least offers life, at a price. If you'd rather have us dead or enslaved by a race you hate, then kill me now, so I won't have to see it. He straightened, presenting himself as a target. *It's your choice.*

Clayton held the rifle steady and took aim. One shot. One bullet to turn the Nest into yet another Terran colony, to rob the pteros of whatever future they might have achieved. He thought briefly of Terra and her history of ruthless expansion. He thought of the Chosen, out to secure the Nest for themselves, not for their partners the pteros, the native-born. He thought of the Shawnee, driven from their homeland by the encroaching settlers from a continent away, a world away. He stared up into Allarn's eyes, and met another pair of eyes, a power eager for life and conquest, waiting.

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Allarn's long head filled the gunsights. And wavered, and slid aside as the rifle went loose in suddenly boneless arms, the barrel jouncing twice on the ground before coming to rest in the dirt.

"You saw this," Clayton rasped. "You knew I couldn't shoot."

I foresaw this, Allarn admitted. *I also saw my death. Both of us suffer from wrongs done our peoples — yours in the distant past, mine yet to be. I gambled your lust for vengeance would be as great as my own, and I was right. I told you our minds were much alike.* The tip of his beak brushed lightly down Clayton's cheek. *My people will live to achieve their potential. For what it's worth, you have my gratitude. And now I must go. Nira's season is upon her, and she's eager for her selected mate.* He cackled insanely and leaped, his wings conquering the air in great effortless sweeps. *Goodbye, Clayton. We will not meet again.*

The ptero soared leisurely over the plain. Clayton clutched the projectile rifle. Allarn was still in range, there was still a chance ... but he knew, just as Allarn knew, that he would not shoot. They were, indeed, too much alike. Each obsessed with vengeance, driven by it to strike out against his own kind. Each consumed by hate.

He did not move after Allarn had gone, not even when the Chosen patrol, making a return sweep, spotted him and dove in for a landing. He offered no resistance when the patrol leader wrenched the rifle from his nerveless grip and took him into custody.

The trial was quick, conducted by Beaumont, with a jury composed of the researchers and a dozen Chosen witnessing. The charges: theft of a weapon, possession of illegal firearms, endangering native sentient life, violation of treaty. The verdict: guilty. The sentence: immediate and permanent deportation from New Eden, and restriction from emigration or duties on any colony world for a minimum of six standard years, after which time the case would be reviewed and further punishment, if considered merited, decided upon.

A week later the shuttle from the Earth ship landed, and Clayton was escorted from his room, to be led under guard to the seat reserved for him. A crowd had gathered outside, a mixed mob of curious Terrans and Chosen, and a dozen pteros. Clayton glanced dully at the reptiles. Allarn was not among them.

Suddenly a woman broke from the crowd and ran to him. She was dressed in the spidersilk and deerhide of the Chosen, but not even the acid taint of her skin could prevent Clayton from hugging her into his arms. "Corinne," he murmured.

"Esther." She tensed in his embrace. "I'm called Esther now." Her whisper quivered with unshed tears. "Clayton, why? How could you do this?"

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He had no answer for her. Staring into her eyes, he saw her suddenly a year from now, a healthy male infant in her arms. She crooned to the child and cooed his name. "No", Clayton said. "Name him after his father. Don't dishonor him with my name."

"Clayton?"

"Dr. Blackbear." The chief of security took his arm. "The shuttle's waiting. It's time to go."

The guards led him away. When Corinne would have followed, the chief of security drew his gun and motioned her back to the crowd. Jared, her husband, came to stand beside her and took her hand.

The craft was a supply shuttle; Clayton would be the only passenger. The orbiting mother ship had been notified; guards would be awaiting him when the shuttle docked. The security men strapped him into a seat, then left him. Clayton gazed at the empty seat beside him. Sharp, biting pain welled up within him, threatening to burst. He forced his gaze to the shuttle view screens.

The shuttle lurched, rumbled, was airborne. Clayton stared down at the receding plains and forests of New Eden. In a year he'd have a nephew there whom he would never see, a son of the Shawnee to whom the Nest would be home and Earth just a meaningless word.

And someday, within the next score of years, another child would be born, out of an egg instead of a womb, with a hide the color of a starless night and Allarn's mad gold eyes — savior and destroyer, living tribute to how far an animal, or a man, would go in the name of survival, or revenge.

Clayton squeezed his eyes shut against sight of the world, against tears. "The pteros will live," he whispered. "I did the right thing." He repeated this over and over, like a litany, as the Nest dropped away behind him, one more insignificant point of light in the vast expanse of space.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The planet called Busby in the story of the same name in our December issue was not intended to relate to any actual person. We regret any possible embarrassment caused to SF writer F. M. Busby by this entirely unintentional and coincidental use of the name.

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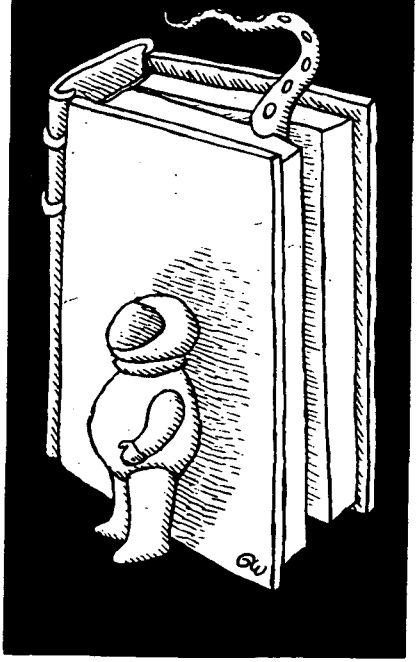
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



The Armageddon Rag, George R.R. Martin, Poseidon Press, $15.95.

Worlds Apart, Joe Haldeman, Viking, $14.95.

Menace Under Marswood, Sterling E. Lanier, Del Rey, $2.95.

Hoka!, Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson, Wallaby, $8.95.

The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Lists, Mike Ashley, Cornerstone Library, $7.95.

The Fantasy Cookbook, Rita and Tim Hildebrandt, Bobbs-Merrill, $14.95 (reviewed by Anne Jordan)

I want to talk about the heart of fantasy: No one yet knows what happened in this country in the late 1960s, though it's already clear no one will ever know whether it was bad or good. But the days of what some call The Movement will remain the central event in the lives of the majority of America's population for decades to come.

We have all begun to realize at last that there will be major quantifiable demographic effects as the Baby Boom of the late 1940s travels up through the years into the 21st century. We are preparing our outnumbered children now for what will be life under an army of occupation in querulous dotage, and we expect that will be bad enough. But what burdens lie — and burdens surely do lie — at the backs of minds formed by the Battle of Michigan Avenue?

What will surface, do you suppose, as the time grows more remote in

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years, yet dearer and more terrifying to so many hearts approaching the end of their tether? Because it is clear that for many people, the 1960s represent the peak of their lives.

The Armageddon Rag is many different sorts of book. But for our purposes here in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, it is a powerful and fundamental fantasy in which the central haunt is not the shade of a departed person, but of a time. A time which will surely not fully depart for at least another four score years. If science comes up with significant life-extension, as seems possible within that span, it is a time that may never depart from all direct consciousness; it may prove to be an immortal apparition. And we know that; I'm convinced we know that, as I'm convinced we have known it all along.

So what George R.R. Martin has evoked here is no mere tingler or "hair-raiser." It is the genuine thing fantasy can do; it is the exact opposite of escape literature, if we dare it.

Martin lived through that time, and is still living through it. No bomb-thrower, he worked for Gene McCarthy's nomination "within the system," resisting what must have been some intoxicating temptations to take more dramatic courses. The leading character in *The Armageddon Rag*, writer Sandy Blair, has the same background. Unlike Martin, who went into SF writing, gathered up his awards, and lives a reasonably stable life, Blair became first a famous and influential underground journalist and then, in one catastrophic moment, was seemingly doomed for the rest of his sorry life to be a failing novelist struggling to maintain middleclass respectability. That moment was the never-solved assassination of "Hobbit" — Pat Hobbins, lead singer of The Nazgul, at the height of a 1971 Woodstock-like rock concert. In that moment, the tide of the revolution broke and all lives in The Movement began to flow downhill.

Now, suddenly, in the 1980s, The Nazgul's former manager is found ritually murdered, the variously wasted three survivors of the group are being recruited by a new impresario with mysterious motives and a sanguinary aura, and The Nazgul will fly again, reformed around a new lead singer — Patrick Henry Hobbins, back from the dead?

Slowly at first, then headlong, Blair becomes involved in these events and finds himself on a pilgrimage, scarifying himself anew, awakening old acquaintances, stirring the ghost from its ashes. He is exactly like a shaken protagonist creeping back into the catacomb at midnight, and although the ambiance of the tale is contemporary America and the labyrinth is psychic, not actual, the effects he evokes are exactly the classical Gothic elements, and have exactly the Gothic effect. This is masterly, an intuitive stroke of artistic genius on Martin's part. Oddly enough

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this occurs in a book with a good freight of noticeable flaws, most of them not deliberate.

You will think, reading this book which is not constructed much like any previous Martin novel, not even *Fevre Dream*, that you can see what's going to happen. And you will be upset by Martin's cheap trick, when you come to it. Well, as a matter of fact, there are some plot developments that do telegraph, but not as many of them as you think, and the cheap trick masks another. It's an unevenly written book, and I don't represent it to you as a masterpiece of construction — Martin has yet to write a book as good as he knows how — but it's a book that takes hold, because it's about something that moves in all of us. I think you will read it from start to finish in one take if you possibly can.

It does not matter — Why am I bothering to explain this? — what your politics were or are now. To some extent it doesn't matter how aware you now think you are of events in Chicago and at Woodstock, Altamont and Kent State, from which Martin has synthesized the mood and circumstances of his story. It doesn't even matter whether you are as conscious as Martin of the role of rock music in The Movement, or whether you regard that role in the same light as he does. What does matter is whether you are conscious that there is something wrong with life, for only then are you equipped to consider how it might constantly be locked in perilous contention with death.

That's true of any work of SF, of course; only the degree to which it hits home on that level is determined by the extent to which it engages our actual life, as distinguished from the layer of life we love to tease with "escape" attempts. It all works on our real lives to some extent. The thing about a book like *The Armageddon Rag* is that, flawed as it may be, directed at a highly controversial area though it may be, it is about something so many of us care so deeply about. Its effect is the effect of daring on the part of its creator, and of dealing with what, buried once, many of us neither want dug up again nor can bear to forget.

I don't think a person decides to write this kind of book, except in the most literal sense. I think a person becomes gripped by this kind of book, and hammers it out. I envy George the experience, and I promise you its echoes can be felt in the work.

Some books are full of good prose, good incident, good characters, good background thought, and still, somehow, they fail to come together. They're maddening to read, because you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong; meanwhile, the good stuff keeps coming at you, and you wonder if perhaps it's just that you're terribly hard to please on this given day.

But maybe your instincts are right.

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Maybe this is, fundamentally, a book that fails despite its long catalog of excellences.

A sort of book we see a lot of is the panoramic "Future Historical," replete with incident and gritty detail, and within that genre we very much prize the Heinleinesque projective story — the tale of what will happen "if this goes on." We find, on reading a well-done example of the kind, that we have been given something to think about as well as to thrill to, and the combination of the two appealing effects is often cited as one of the special pleasures that SF can bring its readers.

Joe Haldeman dedicates *Worlds Apart* to a string of Robert Heinlein characters, which makes a very nice bow to the Grand Master's plainly visible influence. One could have had far worse models. But it may be that we have not yet assimilated all there is to know about how Heinlein makes characters work.

This is the second book in a projected trilogy, a sequel to *Worlds*, in which Earth-satellite dweller Marianne O'Hara, bright, postpubescent, but really quite young, came down dirtside for some not particularly glad research on the scruffy, noisy Earth of the 21st century, and unexpectedly found love — as well as the beginnings of maturity — with groundhog Jeff Hawkings. That book ended with World War III breaking out, and O'Hara barely getting on the last shuttle back up to New New York, her satellite-world, while Hawkings had to stay behind. This one picks up the tale almost immediately thereafter.

The problem, if there is one, is that it's the tale that gets picked up, not Marianne's tale or Jeff's tale, although they certainly figure frequently in the wordage.

Thanks in part to the choppy, episodic, viewpoint-switching style Haldeman seems to favor for his books, there is a curious distance between the reader and the story. Theoretically, that effect ought to lend a certain majesty to a diorama depicting times of great change. But it doesn't work here. For one thing, the chopping is too fine for the story's length; we cut in and out, sometimes so quickly that events become pro forma evocations of similar events in many other novels of this kind: The underhanded opposition on the ruling council, and the sabotage by the religious fanatics, for just two such. These are barely written at all; they're sketched-in, and you, the experienced reader, have to fill in the blanks. Which means there are no new insights, no surprises at all, in what thus become nothing more than stock red herrings.

This goes on. Although the story abounds with incidents of disaster and despair on Earth, mirrored in high-pressure situations on New New York as the overcrowded and marginal last surviving satellite — there is no running thread of reader involvement. I'm sure Haldeman thinks there is; doesn't

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he keep the focus tight on either O'Hara or Hawkings at nearly all times? Well, yes, but proximity, it seems, is not necessarily involvement. We stand by and watch, for instance, as a landing party including O'Hara makes a successful last-ditch effort to forestall a German terrorist plan to nuke New New York, and in reading through these scenes we come upon all sorts of dramatic pictures and subplot lead-ins. But we learn, soon afterward, that there was a plausible chance the German missile could have been stopped even if it had been launched, and if the nuke had detonated it might very well have done the satellite no damage. Haldeman educatively tells us so, thus informatively undermining himself as a storyteller.

We have meanwhile gotten involved with the two African children who stowed away on the shuttle. But one of them is dead, it turns out, and the other, though presented as a pitiable figure, just flicks offstage as soon as we learn she'll be researched for a vaccine to cure the deadly plague swirling round Earth. The result of a biowar virus gone very wrong, it maddens and then kills everyone older than twenty.

That vaccine, delivered to Earth, saves all sorts of lives and enables the beginning of a promising effort to teach the juvenile survivors how to farm, and thus how to break the hunter-gatherer life cycle into which they have all fallen. But when that, too, doesn't go quite as planned, O'Hara is yanked away from this possible involvement as well, and sent, irrevocably now, away from Earth as a high-ranking officer on humankind's first colonizing starship. And so she and Hawkings will apparently never meet again, despite the sporadic radio contacts that have occurred between them over the years of this ... I was going to say "drama," but I would have misled.

There are, as noted, a great many dramatic events. Hawkings, one of the very few surviving adults on Earth, and the only sane one we ever see, wanders the ravaged southeastern states, racked by the acromegaly brought on by the hormone imbalance that preserves his life. He makes a precarious living by being Healer, an itinerant medico in a culture of vicious children, many of whom worship Charles Manson, few of whom have ever heard of the germ theory of disease, and almost none of whom understand the most elementary public health practices.

Here, for instance, is where Brian Aldiss would have written a novel all by itself, and so would a dozen others of us. The premise is fascinating; the children of armageddon, ignorant and superstitious but sustained by the certitude of their death-centered faith, rooting through the rubble, themselves flotsam, seen through the eyes of someone from what amounts to our time.

The counterplaying and the echo-

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ing ironies inherent in this milieu fairly cry out for an artist's dedicated attention. But while Haldeman gives us scenes of death, destruction and suppuration, they are, like the rest of the incidents in this book, newsfilm bits; fast-cut short glimpses snatched from what ought instead to have been an unfurled tapestry of a desperate time.

In realizing that, I think, is where we begin to realize what's wrong. The thing that Heinlein does so well, when he does it well at all, is to not only isolate a break-point in history, but to also identify the exact people who are most involved. Heinlein speaks freely of writing to show what could rationally happen "if this goes on." He is a little more reticent about the dramatic need to answer the foreground question: "Whom does this hurt most?" But his successes are all based on casting his characters in that manner, either overtly or as it gradually dawns on the reader.*

This is what *Worlds Apart* lacks. Everything else is there; the potentially fascinating characters, the picturesque settings, the realpolitik of life dirtside and skyside, the great perspectives of Earth's blasted horizons and the infinite stars. But O'Hara and Hawkings remain just people blown by the winds, hurtling across the scenery at the breakneck pace of a cut-rate tour.

In the case of O'Hara, there is an attempt to justify her centrality by having another character call her a "nexus" — where she goes, trouble inexplicably follows. In a novel about predestination, occult or otherwise paranormal powers, or Secret Masters persecuting Poor Willy, that might fly, as an opening proposition. But here, it is the sound of an author realizing that he is trying to assign all the dramatic burdens of a *War And Peace* to a middle-management functionary and a minor entrepreneur.

That, sadly, is what O'Hara and Hawkings are. She — despite repeated assurances that she had a lot on the ball, and despite the fact that upper management keeps sending her into crucial situations — is really a very ordinary sort of person who, despite a tendency to hand-wringing, appears to be anesthetic to deep emotions. She certainly keeps turning-in barely excusable performances in critical situations. He does only a little bit better, often letting weeks or years go by between effective moves.

They are neither one of them the stuff of heroes, and yet they are also not minor enough to enjoy the archetypical "strengths" of the salt-of-the-

We all know Heinlein writes about The Man Who Knows How. What we tend to overlook is that knowing how to stop a charging rhino is dramatically irrelevant in the absence of the said beast and its appropriately directed animosity. The Man cannot demonstrate he Knows How without also being The Man on The Spot, however unlikely it might rationally be that, of all the people in the teeming universe, the person we are encouraged by the author to be is the person around whom the universe revolves.

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earth little people who carry Heinlein's spears for him. In short, they are very much like real people. But a vivid and convincing historical drama cannot have mere real people at its center. The fundamental problem here, in what turns out to be an over-intellectualized and over-worked piece of creation, is that Haldeman has remained remorselessly true to probability and life, to the fatal detriment of believability.

Sterling E. Lanier's *Menace Under Marswood* is a book with a fascinating premise. Viz.: The U.S. and the U.S.S.R., in a laudable cooperative effort, rocket bacteria, seeds, and ultimately more complicated genetic packages to Mars, in a well conceived program to give the worn-out old soldier a breathable atmosphere and a viable ecology. But the Chinese, paranoid as all get-out about the Russkis and not too sure about us, deliberately contaminate it by firing-in all the weeds and nasty critters they can think of, so that by the time this story opens, Mars is a hellhole of jungled menace, with raveningly competitive life-forms (including tribes of humans gone "native" in the bush) and, as the Legionnaire-like troopers of the human establishment gradually realize, even room for some ultramysterious goings-on that might reflect the survival of a canny and coldly inimical native race of Martians.

Well, that far, so good. You can see that plot-threads begin to tangle and interweave shortly after the renegade chieftain of great dignity turns out to be in sub rosa alliance with the good colonel of the fort, object the defeat of the nonhuman menace. It gets plainer when the chief's companion turns out to be female and mysteriously fated to resonate to the mere presence of the upstanding junior officer from Fort Zinderneuf ... er, from Fort Agnew (sic).... And what of the enigmatic alien figure in the drug-induced dream they share? Eh? What about that, hein? Zut alors! Qu'est-ce que c'est que ca, hmmm?

In truth, Lanier makes no secret of his homage to the Beau Geste School of Commercial Writing ... not that he could. My problem with it is that a person intelligent enough to put something like this together — and it is hard to do, make no mistake about it — ought to be intelligent enough, or at least courteous enough, to conceal his contempt for his readers.

Now, a jape; a good jape at adventure-cliche fiction, with the readers warmly included in the fun, is another sort of thing entirely. Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson did exactly that with their Hoka stories, which began in this magazine in 1955 and are now collected as *Hoka!*, a trade paperback with a mindblowing cover that brilliantly conveys the premise.

On a planet somewhere out at the edge of the universe live a race of proud, dignified creatures who happen

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to resemble teddy bears and who have gone ga-ga for cliche versions of Terrestrial history. They delight in acting them out. "Any role that strikes their fancy they will play, individually or as a group, to the limits of the preposterous and beyond."(I quote from the relevant, if rather exasperated, entry in the *Encyclopaedia Galactica*, 11th Edition.)

In addition to the Michael Whelan cover, incorrectly credited to Phil Foglio in the carelessly written indicia, there are numerous interior illustrations by Foglio, Victoria Poyser, Nicola Cuti and Lela Dowling. The whole thing is a delight, and I commend it to you almost unreservedly.

Although this is a Simon & Schuster Wallaby Book, it is published "By arrangement with Tom Doherty Associates," which, whatever else it means, means you get proofreading (and copyright-notice writing) in the inimitable manner displayed at Tor Books by Doherty's packaging associate, James Baen. Baen has never had the inclination to pay these matters as much mind as they deserve, and there are times and places when this plainly gets in the way of ideal communication to the dues-paying reader.

Perhaps now that he is going to be Simon & Schuster's SF packager, replacing the former Timescape group, he will find himself able to staff up to a higher standard.

The Illustrated Book of Science Fiction Lists, from Cornerstone Library, is another Simon & Schuster trade paperback, in this case picking up Mike Ashley's United Kingdom edition of about a year ago, putting a fresh cover on it, and correcting the numerous typos and stripping errors in it before putting it out on the U.S. market.

It's as fascinating as any book of lists ... more fascinating to us Stefnists, of course ... and it brings you things like 10 definitions of science fiction (every one of them full of holes, of course), what the various award winners in fiction have been over the years, what the first 10 significant SF films were, what were five of the first novels about voyages through time, etc., etc. Many of these lists are quoted from other people, some of whom I would say had soft heads but every one of whom is an impeccable authority. (I am one of them, so who's calling the kettle black?)

I have never fully understood the fascination of such compendia, but I certainly can't dispute its existence, since I consumed this book from cover to cover without stopping for anything but the occasional growl of assent or the derisive howl. It's the audience-participation part of it that's the stroke of genius, I guess, and long-time annotator and indexer Ashley has done it all quite well.

However, Simon & Schuster's production department has made a very quirky job of revising the U.K. type, and so I wonder indeed just how care-

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fully printed the Jim Baen SF line is going to be, after all.

What the hell; it'll all come out in the wash of history anyway, right?

— *A.B.*

When an author sets out to mate two distinct genres, the outcome can be monstrous, sublime, or not come off at all. Rita and Tim Hildebrandt make such an attempt in *The Fantasy Cookbook*, joining fantasy and nonfiction; in this case, cookbooks. As the genres don't quite manage to consummate their curious union, *The Fantasy Cookbook* must be judged by its parts: first as fantasy, then as a cookbook.

The Fantasy Cookbook purports to be the history of the mythical continent of Zir. Zir is peopled by the usual types found in fantastical realms: dwarfs, Amazons, elves, trolls, fairies, merpeople, and one rather gratuitous wizard named Alzar. The Hildebrandts devote a section to each of these, detailing lifestyle, personality, abilities and, of course, eating habits. We are told, for example, that elves "only sleep for two or three hours a day," and, "eat two main meals a day, one in the late morning and the other at their nightly feast." Merpeople "live extremely long lives and can stay out of water for up to a week if kept damp." (Do you sprinkle them with water like laundry to be ironed?)

The intent of all this detail is to create a sense of the magical, a feeling of faerie. Unfortunately, Rita Hildebrant's flat narrative style lacks sparkle and makes the fantastic prosaic. The text is filled with that cloying sense of cuteness too often seen in third-rate fantasy. All this is redeemed to an extent by Tim Hildebrandt's black and white line drawings and the eight full-color illustrations — too few — tipped-in at the center of the book.

Considered as a cookbook, *The Fantasy Cookbook* is more of a success. After pushing past the anxious assurance on the cover that these are "real recipes you can cook in your own home" (as opposed to needing a cave or castle, I suppose), one finds, indeed, a wide variety of recipes from soups to desserts. The stews and desserts are particularly good; I especially like the recipe for Apple Crust in the Troll section. This proves, I imagine, that trolls aren't all bad. The recipes are well-constructed and tasty although surrounded by a sort of West Coast nuts-and-berries aura.

The Fantasy Cookbook is effective as a cookbook and worth the price as such. The recipes do indeed, as the flyleaf suggests, have a "stick-to-your-ribs" quality, and one can ignore the "stick-to-the-roof-of-your-mouth" cutseyness of the narrative.

— *ANNE JORDAN*

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Donald Westlake is one of the best and most popular mystery novelists in the U.S., creator of the Dortmunder gang and such books as HOT ROCK, BANK SHOT and JIMMY THE KID. He writes an occasional short story, and we're delighted to offer this one.

Hydra

BY

DONALD E. WESTLAKE

I'm afraid that's the church again," Carrie Morton said. "Greg, push on."

"That's all right, I like it," Fay White told her, being polite, but Greg Morton had already pushed the bar on the slide projector — chip-*clock* — and after a brief interval of rectangular white, the wall reblossomed into yet another view of the same small concrete-block church roughly painted in pastels, glistening like a week-old wedding cake in the bright southern sun.

"Oh, dear," Carrie said. "Too many of the same picture. But I just *loved* that church."

"I'd be fascinated by those colors, too," Fay said, hating herself for her spineless politeness but helpless to change her manner. A dozen years ago in college it had been like this, Carrie blithe and uncaring while Fay smiled and said it was all right; and now here they were again, just the same.

Chip-chip-chip-chip— "The people are so *primitive*," Carrie said, as Greg struggled with the machine and they all stared at the white-again wall. "They're *alleged* to be Christians, but what went on in that building seemed awfully jungle-jungle to *me*."

Then why not photograph that, Fay thought, sipping gamely at her predinner drink. She and Carrie and Greg all held tiny glasses of a heavy, too-sweet South American liqueur the Mortons had brought back, while Fay's husband, Reed — no spineless politeness for *him* — sat contentedly with a glass of beer. I wish I were more like Reed, Fay thought. Self-confident and serene. I wish I liked my friends more.

Clock. Four smiling children shyly posed in that same harsh sunlight beside a rusted, springless, dark green American car. "So childlike," Carrie

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said, comfortably smiling.

"Well, they're children," Fay said, looking at the vulnerable little faces, the knobby brown knees.

"No, all of them, I mean." Carrie laughed. "Such sweet people, but so *naive!*"

"Ripe for agitators," Greg said.

The picture on the wall trembled, and Fay frowned at the children. A withered *arm?* And wasn't that— "Wait!" she said, but chip-*chock*, and they were looking now at a placid man walking down a dirt road, a large earthenware jug balanced on his shoulder. The road was dry and dusty, the land to both sides a sunbeaten brown. "Oh, it's *Hoo*-lee-oh!" Carrie said happily.

"Was that— Was one of those—" Fay looked across the projector's beam at Carrie, blonde and sweet and recently maternal. "Was one of those children blind?"

But Reed was saying, "Agitators, Greg? Down there, too?"

"It's the same old story," Greg said, while Carrie turned her open smiling face to listen. "The big American company comes in, brings prosperity, jobs, consumer goods, education — *medical care*, for Christ's sake — and the first thing you know the locals think it's all theirs."

"Hoo-lee-oh was our houseboy," Carrie said, smiling at Fay. "I can't tell you what a pleasure it is, being where there's *no* servant problem."

"Hoo-lee-oh?"

Carrie spelled it out, and it turned out to be *Julio*. "He made the most delicious wine," Carrie said, "and used to bring us just *jugs* of the stuff. Not grape wine, from flowers or something. I never could understand how he grew anything at all — just *look* at the ground. When I think of my poor little kitchen garden; *hopeless*, tomatoes like acorns."

"Miserable soil," Greg said. "but naturally the politicals carried on all the time about pollution."

"It's the same up here," Reed said. "Love Canal, all that. Mountains out of molehills."

"Exactly," Greg said. "People make mistakes, we're all human, but you'd think it was *deliberate*. We aren't barbarians, for Christ's sake."

Fay twisted around to look at Greg. "I read about some valley in Brazil," she said, "where there's so much industry now, so much pollution, nothing grows anymore. And birth defects, and—"

Greg nodded, mouth expressing disapproval. "The dead valley, I know. Believe me, the politicals beat us over the head with *that* one, even though it isn't American companies, it's all multinationals, European, South American. But they did go too far there, no question, we all know there have to be *some* controls. But what *we* have to realize, every one of us right here in the U.S.A., the world is going to pass us by."

"I don't follow," Reed said.

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Chip-*clock*. Julio and his jug became a very pregnant Carrie, in voluminous white top and pink slacks, blooming and beaming in front of their neat white modular company cottage. In the background, black lines like the smoke in a child's drawing squiggled upward from the tall metal stacks. "I wore pink the whole time," Carrie said, "so I'd have a girl."

"Vickie's such a little doll," Fay told her.

Greg was saying to Reed, "If it weren't for U.S. government regulations, PetChem wouldn't have *moved* down there back in the sixties. I'm all for the environment — I mean, for Christ's sake, we all breathe the same air — but you've got to weigh the factors. These countries in the south, they *want* our business, they're ready to make an accommodation."

"How far along were you?" Fay asked.

"Six months." Carrie smiled dreamily, reminiscently, at the image of her pregnant self. "I carried so big, for a while I thought I was having triplets."

"Of course, *they* breed like rabbits," Greg said, "so they hardly show. The women. Walk along the road, you wouldn't know they were pregnant at all. Squat, and poof."

Laughing, Carrie said, "It's not quite *that* easy."

"Still," Fay said "I don't suppose prenatal care is exactly up to our standards."

"One reason we're back," Greg said. Chip-*clock*. "Also, we wanted Vickie born in the U.S.A."

"That's the company lake," Carrie said.

The people along the shore were of wo clearly defined types. "Even the athing suits," Fay said, "Americans look like Americans."

Carrie said, "Remember the summer we both took cabins on Lake Monequois? Doesn't it look like that?"

"Except for the volcanoes."

"Maybe we can do the lake again ıext summer," Carrie said. "Now that ve're back."

"You can't swim there anymore. They say it's algae or something."

"Oh, too bad." But Carrie's smile emained sunny, and she said, "Well, ıere's still the ocean."

Reed said, "Is that your Julio again? Are all those kids his?"

"I told you so," Greg said. "Like rabbits. Of course, we had to let the locals use the company lake, I mean we're *democratic*, for Christ's sake."

A child behind Julio was crawling toward the water. Fay said, "Where's his legs?"

Chip-*clock*. "What?" Greg said.

"Nothing. Never mind." Fay frowned at the white wall.

Carrie said, "That's the end of that box, honey."

Greg's watch was a masterpiece of several technologies. Consulting it, he said, "Seven fifty-three, dear. You wanted to know."

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"Oh, my goodness." Carrie's long legs had been curled beneath her while they watched the slides; now she unlimbered and rose, saying, "Dinner's in five minutes. Later on, if we feel like it, we can look at the rest."

Greg said, "Maybe that's enough for tonight. One of the best things about being back, we've left all those hassles behind."

Fay said to Carrie, "Can I help?"

"Oh, no, just relax."

But of course Fay didn't. Leaving Greg and Reed to talk about government restrictions, she followed Carrie to the kitchen, where small red lights on various machines gave assurance that the meal was coming along. Carrie said, peering through the oven window, "Lord, this is *one* thing I'm glad to get back to. Modern appliances."

"Didn't the company housing have all that?"

"Microwave? Are you kidding?" Lifting a pot lid, releasing a pillow of vegetable-scented steam, Carrie said, "All you get there is the *basics*. A *tiny* Italian refrigerator, barely enough ice cubes for two people — Do you know, if you had friends over for dinner, they'd bring their own ice cube trays? Honestly."

"Other company people, you mean."

"Who else was there? Fay, I can't tell you how much we missed you and Reed."

"We're glad you're back," Fay said. And it was true. The uneasiness and discontent were all on Fay's side, and pointless. Carrie *was* her best friend, since college, since they'd been dating the boys who were now their husbands. "*Very* happy you're back," Fay said, and impulsively kissed Carrie's smooth, round cheek.

There really was nothing for Fay to do in the kitchen, and very little even for Carrie. The machines had everything under control. Having time, Fay went through the bedroom into the bath to refresh her makeup and wash her hands. Returning, she passed what had been Greg's den and was now the nursery, and movement caught her eye. Vickie was awake.

The baby had been asleep earlier, when they'd all come in to look at her. Now Fay stepped into the nursery, half-lit by a small table lamp, and leaned over the crib to smile down at Carrie's child.

Vickie was fair, like her mother, with wide-set eyes and pug nose. Her eyes were closed, but her pudgy hands and feet were moving, in that aimless way of infants learning their bodies. Light gleamed on her soft stretching throat.

Perhaps sensing Fay's presence, the baby abruptly opened her eyes and gazed upward with intense concentration. Beautiful green eyes, darker than jade. Then the wide mouth opened and the baby gave a gassy smile, complete with bubbles.

It's a trick of the light, Fay thought, but it wasn't. Holding tight to the side

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of the crib, she watched Vickie laugh. *We think we're safe,* she thought. *We move the danger far away where it can only hurt people we don't care about, and we stay here safe. But it's coming, anyway.*

In the doorway, Carrie said, "Fay? Dinner."

I can't let her guess I know, Fay thought, but when she turned the truth must have been plain in her eyes because Carrie, smiling with some irritation, said, "Oh, you noticed."

"Carrie."

"It's nothing, it's nothing." Taking Fay's arm, walking her out to the master bedroom, Carrie said, "There's a company doctor knows all about it, there's a little operation when Vickie's just a bit older, there won't be a *trace.*"

"A *company* doctor? This has happened before?"

"And they're all just as healthy and happy as can be," Carrie said, smiling her contented smile. "Come along to dinner." She leaned close, the smile turning confidential. "But don't mention it to anyone, all right? I mean, it's going to be fixed."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't."

And she wouldn't. Following Carrie to the dining room, Fay knew she would never mention it to a soul. But she would remember. Clear in her mind's eye it would remain, the vision of Vickie, the wide-set deep green eyes, the little pug nose, the forked tongue.

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THE STRANGER FROM BEYOND THE SKY

The handsome stranger cast his eye
On Shirley-girl and gave a sigh.
"Oh talk a while," he said, "with I."
She liked his noble knobby dome.
They dinnered at the Hippodrome.
She fell for him, she brought him home.
"Oh, mother see this guy of mine,"
She said. "He's from ā noble line.
His I.Q. soars to 9-9-9."
But what the mother said was "Yoik!
I doubt me, girl, that it will woik.
It strikes me that he is a joik.
"It isn't just his extra eye,
Or that he lives beyond the sky,
Or has more toes than you or I.
"Or whalebone teeth. But it's a shock
When from his brow the cuckoo cock
Pops out and carols 'Eight o'clock.'
"Oh give him, dear, I beg, the boot.
You no more need this alien brute
Than fishes need a parachute."
Said Shirley "Stranger, it's been keen.
I loved your mouthful of baleen.
And now I beg you Leave the Scene."
He wept a tear. The tear was green.

— *R.A. LAFFERTY*

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Here is the startling personal testimony of a dieter about a diet pill that really works. The question you must answer for yourself is: can you live with the side effect to end all side effects...

The F&SF Diet

BY
JAMES PATRICK KELLY

Have you ever looked at the ads in the back of this magazine? There are more than just booksellers and fanzines. You can mail-order carnivorous plants, Ph.D.'s, Korean wives — take a peek. The secrets of hypnotism, creation science, and résumé writing are yours for only $9.95. A couple of months ago, I saw this:

LOSE WEIGHT FAST! 10 lbs. in 10 days! Eat all you want — no restrictions! Send $1 for Dr. Z. E. Beal's amazing GET EVEN DIET, Box 19, Brimstone, TX, 78760.

Now I've followed the diet trail from Scarsdale to Beverly Hills, guided by Fonda, Simmons, Atkins, Pritikin — all the names. I've suffered through all-meat meals and no-meat meals, meals of water and brown rice and parsnips and tofu. I was the Sisyphus of dieting; just as I was about to shed that last roll of flab, I would slip on an olive pizza, stumble over a half-gallon of maple walnut ice cream, and slide back into obesity.

I'm five-nine-and-a-half; that never changes. The day I answered that ad, I weighed 223 pounds. All the guy wanted was a buck.

It isn't easy being fat, you know, but I could handle it if only I didn't have to be jolly. God, I'd like to take a chain saw to Santa Claus. The expectations of the thin world make fat men miserable. We are not allowed to have opinions, ambitions, or svelte women. We must sweat too much, wear baggy pants, and jiggle when we laugh at the cracks that other people make about us. I worked with a bunch of engineers who don't know the difference between irony and ironing. All day long

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these guys would parade past my desk and inflict their unfunny jokes on me. I used to reward them with a politely faked snicker — until they gave Joe Leone my promotion.

O.K., so I don't have a technical background; I wasted my years at college studying English literature. But that was just an excuse. When it comes to putting ink on Mylar, I'm the best draftsman Collier Engineering has. The real reason they passed me over is that they couldn't bring themselves to promote a fat man.

And of course Joe Leone is the governor's nephew. Joe Leone had been a civil engineering major at Notre Dame before he flunked out. Joe Leone played tennis with Old Man Collier himself. Joe Leone had the body of Michelangelo's David — and the brains of marble to match.

Had. All right, there is no justification for what I did.

But there was plenty of provocation. The only thing Joe Leone had ever managed was the office football pool. So when they made him manager of the drafting department, he knew he was in trouble. Whom did he turn to for help? The guy whose job he had stolen: me. He called me into his new office. "Stan," he said, "let's clear the air. I know you wanted this job, and between you, me, and the water cooler, you probably deserve it as much as I do."

Provocation.

"I've been talking to the guys up front, and we've decided to create a new position especially for you." He shook my hand. "Congratulations, Mr. Assistant Manager." It sounded nice at the time, but the way it worked out, I ended up doing not only my own work but most of his, too. Meanwhile, he was up in the front office flirting with the secretaries and taking credit for my effort. Provocation, O.K.?

The amazing diet doctor took his own sweet time getting back to me. Truth to tell, I was surprised to find a package marked "Brimstone, TX" in my mail. I'd sent my buck in months before and had long since decided that I'd been suckered. The tiny box had been wrapped in an old grocery bag; the only address on it was my own, hand-printed with a marker. Inside were some crumpled pages of the Brimstone *Epitaph* and a single mimeo-cotton taped to it. This is what it said:

Dear Dieter,

Welcome to the GET EVEN DIET. Enclosed you will find two capsules. One is for you; the other for your worst enemy. You will begin to notice results shortly after ingestion. The capsules must be used within ten days of the postmarked date.

WARNING: DO NOT TAMPER WITH THE CAPSULES!

Sincerely,

Z. E. "Bubba" Beal, D.D.

At first I thought it was a joke. Sometimes people would borrow my

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F&SF's when the office copy of *Penthouse* was in use. But as I unwrapped the cotton I got this strange shivery feeling, the kind of feeling you get from a twisted horror story that ends with evil still prowling the world.

Just as the instructions promised, there were two capsules. Each was three-quarters of an inch long — I measured. The casings were clear; there was no logo or manufacturer's imprint. Crammed into each was a tiny blue creature with smooth skin, and orange, pin-sized eyes. They looked like salamanders with broken tails. They were so small, however, that I couldn't really tell what they were. My dictionary came with a magnifying glass; I set the capsules on the table to go fetch it. That's when I discovered one of the first principles of fear: It is the littlest things that are the scariest.

The capsules jumped across the table. The things inside were alive and clawing to get out!

I skipped supper that night, just plain forgot to eat. I stared at those things through the magnifier until way past midnight. All I had to show for my effort was a headache and a few mystifying observations. The salamanders could see, and if they saw each other, they went into a frenzy. Separated or shut together in a dark place, they were calm as corpses. They had three teeny digits at the end of each of their four legs. Though at first I had thought that the capsules were filled with air, I realized that the salamanders were actually floating in a clear liquid. Water, I assumed. One of the salamanders was speckled with red pips, the other with yellow. Other than that, they seemed identical.

I scarcely remember being at work the next day. I spent most of my time watching the clock, just waiting until four-thirty when I could rush off to the Boston Public Library. I stayed there until closing, pulling out stacks of books on amphibians and lizards, dusty texts on zoology and animal taxonomy. I pored for some time over a coffee table book, *The Magnificant Reptiles of Texas.* Nowhere did I find anything like broken-tailed blue salamanders that would fit into a cold capsule. The next night I talked my way into the stacks at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. No luck. I toyed with the idea of bringing the little creatures to one of the professors for identification, but I figured that that would be the surest way to lose them. The next day at work, I did what I should have done to begin with: I tried to call Z. E. Beal using the company's WATS line. That's when I really started to get excited. Just to be sure, I went down to the post office on my lunch hour to check the zip-code book.

There is no Brimstone in Texas. It may seem strange when I tell you that I was elated by this news. I spent the afternoon mooning at my drafting board. I guess I expected Rod Serling to step from behind the rack of blueprints and say something like "Portrait

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of a man in search of a miracle. Meet Stan Munkacsy, age twenty-nine, weight 223. All he asks from life is a thin man's chance. In a little while he may get that chance with the help of a strange parcel, posted from...."

"Earth to Stan, earth to Stan." Joe Leone snuck up on me from behind. "Do you read, Stan? Over." His voice was like the alarm of a smoke detector: loud and irritating. He startled me — hell, half the department looked up from their boards.

"I hear you, Joe," I said quietly, hoping to keep the conversation private. "What?"

But he clearly was playing to the larger audience. "Would you mind beaming down from orbit for the afternoon? We're paying you to draft, not daydream. The engineers are screaming for the preliminary drawings on the Concord plant, and you've got the last sheet. I've covered for you all week, you know, but enough is enough."

"You're a real sweetheart, Joe."

That was a mistake. "O.K., Mr. Wise Guy." He flushed, momentarily at a loss. "O.K." He scooped up the latest issue of F&SF from my taboret. "I'll trade you: this for that site plan. And it better be today, you understand?"

It wasn't that he had humiliated me; it was that he *thought* he had humiliated me. That's when I decided that he, at least, was going to swallow one of Z. E. Beal's magic salamanders — even if I didn't. At four-thirty I brought him the drawing and set my trap.

"I'm sorry about mouthing off this afternoon, Joe." I offered him my hand, which he shook reluctantly. "It's been a long week. Come on, I'll buy you a brew." I knew he wouldn't turn me down. Every Friday after work he went to Wilma's Tap 'N' Grill to tip a few with the other TGIF regulars. One thing about Joe Leone: he never needed much of an excuse to party.

As I think back to that afternoon, I don't feel so bad about what happened to Joe Leone. The way that guy was drinking, there was definitely a paunch in his future. Wilma's was jammed with people from the industrial park; there were several groups of Collier workers, and all of them wanted Joe Leone. While he floated from table to table, I settled down next to Adrienne, Old Man Collier's secretary. She was forty trying to look thirty; she had henna-red hair and dark, made-up eyes. Normally at work she was as fierce as Cerberus, but after a few beers she would get a misty, disappointed look and start twisting her rings, wondering aloud why nobody liked her. I knew Joe Leone would stop by eventually to pay his respects. She ran the tollbooth on the highway to the boss's heart.

Joe didn't disappoint me. We had just ordered our second pitcher when he weaved over to us.

"How about that drink, Joe?"

"Sure, sure." He sat down heavily,

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and before I could spring my trap, he jumped into it. "You know, Adrienne, I'm pretty mad at you. How come you don't tell your friends when it's your birthday? If I hadn't heard it from Janice at lunch, I would've missed it altogether. As it was, all I had time to do was get you a card." He handed her an envelope from his vest pocket. "Shame on you and happy birthday." From the look on her face, you could tell that he would never have to wait to see Collier again.

I filled his glass half-full, just to be safe, and added my secret ingredient. "I'll drink to that," I said, holding my own glass up. "A birthday chug for Adrienne." All right, maybe it wasn't inspired, but I drank, Adrienne drank, Joe Leone drank, and we all set empty glasses down on the table.

I stayed for a few more rounds than I should have. I guess I was watching to make sure that Joe Leone didn't drop dead. An hour passed as I doused my qualms with beer. Joe Leone looked fine, so I left.

I went home, poured a large can of baked beans into a pot, sliced in four hot dogs, and set my supper on the stove to cook. Then I poured another beer and sat down at the kitchen table. While I was waiting I took out the other capsule and set it in the middle of my empty plate. It didn't stay there; the blue salamander was restless. It rolled around like it wanted to go somewhere. I picked the capsule up and held it close to my face so I could see. The teeny orange eyes seemed to be staring at me. I popped the capsule into my mouth and washed it down with a swig of beer.

Why not? Frat brothers swallow goldfish, don't they? And you have to remember that I had been drinking for over three hours. But it wasn't only bottled courage that made me do it. It was something else, something I think that you, as a reader of this magazine, can understand.

When I was a kid I used to wish on the wishing star for a twister to whisk me to Oz. Later I wanted either to be snatched by a flying saucer or to fall down a rabbit hole. Just before I stopped wishing, I begged to be an astronaut. Sounds familiar, does it? After a certain age, however, you just have to face facts. Such things don't happen in this world, more's the pity. You're too old, too poor, too fat ever to ride the space shuttle. Probably the most exotic landscape you'll ever see will be Disney World. But then, long after you had stopped hoping, someone offers you a free ride to the Emerald City. You are given a chance — one chance — to experience the fan-

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tastic. Do you turn it down? Maybe if your favorite magazine were *Popular Mechanics*. But you read F&SF.

You eat that capsule, too.

The first thing that happened was that I was stone-cold sober by the time I finished my beans and franks. I had a few more beers to try to forget about the slimy little thing swimming around in my gut. They had no effect. I learned later (after several determined efforts) that I am no longer able to get drunk. Or even tipsy. When the booze failed me, I grabbed a double bag of chips and turned to the tube to turn off my mind. I stayed up right through the double creature feature. I was afraid to fall asleep for fear that I would wake up dead. Finally, though, I dozed off on the couch.

It was nearly noon when I woke up. The first thing I did was weigh myself. 222. I had eaten my fill of chips, beans and franks, drunk enough beer to fill a bathtub, and I was down a pound!

Gluttony does not begin to describe my excesses of that weekend. I had to test Beal's claims, didn't I? It was a glorious, nonstop oink-a-thon: a pan of walnut brownies, a large pizza with mushroom and sausage, a half-gallon of heavenly hash ice cream, a bucket of fried chicken with double orders of fries and onion rings, two boxes of Cap'n Crunch cereal, a family-pak of mixed cold cuts, a shopping bag full of freshly popped popcorn, and a case of beer. Monday morning I stepped onto my bathroom scale, and it told me I weighed 219. I walked into work whistling "Follow the Yellow Brick Road."

Joe Leone looked as if he had spent the weekend in a refrigerator. His cheeks were puffy, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face was the color of mayonnaise. He looked so bad that I almost felt sorry for him.

I let it be known that I had commenced a new diet and that I would no longer tolerate fat jokes. This announcement was greeted with justifiable skepticism; by lunchtime there was a pool to guess the day I would quit. My sympathies for Joe Leone vanished when I saw that he had taken one of the earliest picks.

Is there anything more satisfying than proving to the crowd that they are wrong? I proved it with a vengeance. After the first ten days the skepticism at the office gave way to a bemused admiration. When I dropped below 200, admiration gave way to envy. "How do you do it?" they all wanted to know. "The hard way." I would look stern and think of tollhouse chocolate chip cookies. "I don't eat." They would nod, faces blank, as if I had replied in Hungarian.

I bought a full-length mirror for my bedroom and spent of lot of time standing in front of it, naked, marveling at the smug man who had lurked beneath all those rolls of miserable flab. Who was he? At 180, I was no longer sure of the answer. 170! I had not weighed 170 since junior high

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school. By now people at Collier were treating me with a mixture of awe and incredulity. I think they would have found it easier to accept had I sprouted wings and flapped to my drafting board every morning. Even Old Man Collier himself wanted to witness the miracle. He called me into his office one afternoon, ostensibly to discuss his plans to fast-track the Merrymeeting sewer project. What he really wanted was to see for himself what kind of freak he had working for him, a man who could lose fifty pounds in two months. I think I impressed the hell out of him. When I talked, he kept nodding like one of those dolls with a spring-mounted head. After that I had more new friends than a lottery winner.

I didn't know what to make of my new status at work. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I reveled in it; Tuesdays and Thursdays I felt like a fraud. I was still Stan Munkacsy; my passions remained greasy food and SF. All that had changed was my packaging. If people liked me now because I was thin, well, who needs friends like that? And if they liked me because of my willpower, well, their friendship was misplaced. It was the little blue salamander that should have been the toast of the office.

And then there was the problem of Joe Leone. Thanks to our salamander connection, he gained a pound for every pound of Oreos I ate. It was funny at first. By the second week he was bringing his own lunch: celery and carrot sticks. Never did a man take so long to eat so little; I think he subscribed to the "Chew-it-long-enough-and-it'll-taste-like-a-real-meal" theory. But that didn't last long. Soon he was down to the sugar-free chewing gum and water diet. He looked like an Italian sausage.

Then there was the time he came over to hassle me about some bad dimension lines on the drawings for the Merrymeeting pumping station. His problem was in the upper right corner of the sheet; as he stretched over my drafting board, I heard what sounded like a horse sneezing. His ass literally burst out of his pants; it was the Grand Canyon of seam failure. His jockey shorts were fire engine red and made of some silky synthetic material. He did a crisp about-face and tried to hide his undoing.

"My God." He had the sick smile of someone who has just discovered what sweetbreads are. "Do something!"

"Like what?" I said. "Does your tailor make house calls?"

"Get my suit coat. Hanging in my office." I obliged. He put it on and turned just enough so that I could view the ruins. "Well?"

"If only you were wearing gray flannel underpants."

He moaned. "Don't you have any safety pins? Straight pins?"

"Thumbtacks," I said helpfully.

He gave me a look that could toast marshmallows, then cast desperately

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about my cubicle for some solution to his dilemma. His gaze rested on a couple of buttons hanging near my Tolkien calendar. One said, "There is no such thing as a free lunch;" the other, "Reality is a crutch for those who can't handle science fiction."

"Pins in those, right?"

"They're heirlooms, Joe. You can borrow them if you want, but I'm not taking them apart."

"O.K., O.K. Do it."

"Do what?"

"Pin me." He flushed nearly the color of his underwear. "I can't reach."

I pinned both of my buttons high enough on the seam so that his jacket covered them; they clanked softly as he walked. With this jury-rigged decency he beat a retreat to his car. He told me to put the word out that he had gone home sick. I got my buttons back the next day, but he never did thank me.

Not long after that, the rumor mill had it that Old Man Collier had thrown him over for a new tennis partner. We began to see more of Joe Leone as he spent less time in the front office — which was no fun for us. With each pound he gained, the pH of his personality grew more acidic. He was literally breathing down our necks with his kibitzing and bitching.

Yet despite everything, I felt sorry for Joe Leone. The intensity of his suffering was far greater than the intensity of my dislike. He was by now truly obese, but he was totally unprepared for the fat life. I realized too late that Joe Leone had *been* his beautiful body. There was nothing else to him; he had the wit and personality of a jockstrap. By ruining his one asset in life I had nearly destroyed him. The worst of it (for both of us, I think) was that people were constantly referring him to me for diet advice. Even if he did not know that I was the cause of his troubles, he had reason enough to hate me. Yet he didn't. In fact, the fatter he got, the more he depended on me. He had lost all confidence in himself. He wouldn't send a memo until I edited it; he wouldn't make an assignment unless I approved. He was always calling me into his office. I think he sensed that I had some diet secret that I was holding back; he hounded me for it.

A month ago he took his two weeks' vacation and two unpaid weeks and sent himself to a fat farm. Two things happened while he was gone. The first was that I stopped losing weight, leveling off at a svelte 165. I was relieved; if I'd gotten any thinner, I would have had to wear diver's weights to keep from blowing away. The second was that Collier called me up front last week and started quizzing me about the drafting department. He wanted my opinion of Joe Leone as a manager, of what had changed Joe Leone, of whether Joe Leone could bounce back. He asked if I thought I could do Joe Leone's job. I have never felt so bad about telling the truth in my life. At the end of the interview Collier

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told me to call him Jack, and he shook my hand like we were closing a deal.

If only I could have laid off my conscience; suddenly guilt had my imagination working overtime. I worried now about the mysterious Z. E. "Bubba" Beal. I'm not blind; I saw right from the start who this joker was pretending to be. But what if there was no pretense involved? I could be in deep trouble. Does the Almighty recognize implied consent contracts?

I was plowing through the Sunday *Times* this morning when the phone rang. It was Joe Leone; he begged to come over. Either we had a bad connection or he was crying. I told him he could stop by.

I wasn't surprised to hear that the fat farm had done nothing for him; I had been overindulging my weakness for pasta of late. He had given up in disgust and come home only to find his live-in girlfriend in bed with a professional skier. There had been a nasty scene that ended with Joe Leone's exit under duress. It was her apartment. Now he was staying with his parents, but that couldn't last; his father refused to speak to him directly, referring to his son in the third person as "that sniveling blimp." There were no genes for tact in the Leone family. He said he'd spent the last three days fasting; he seemed slightly delirious as he eyed the Ring Ding wrappers scattered around my chair.

I didn't have the heart to tell him what was new at work.

"I need help." He put his head in his hands. "I just don't know what to do anymore. I've tried everything. I..." Then he started to blubber.

Now understand me, I'm not trying to make Joe Leone into a sympathetic character. Even when he begged for help, the word that came most naturally to his lips was "I." Had I been a disinterested observer, I would have broken out the Kleenex, given him a polite hearing, and then sent him on his self-pitying way. But I was the author of his misery. I had caused his transformation from arrogant airhead to "sniveling blimp." Even though the change had merely been from being one sort of jerk to another, nevertheless it was a change he had had no choice in making.

Still, what I did, I did for myself, not for him. Do you know how it feels to be the villain in your own life story? And then there was the possibility that my immortal soul was in hock to some huckster from Texas. So don't propose me for canonization. I simply saw my duty to myself and did it.

"Joe," I said, "you could stay here if you like. At least until you pull things back together. As far as losing weight goes, I think I know what your problem is. You stick with me, and together we'll see about getting you back into shape."

He sobbed, he laughed, he hugged me and thanked me and told me I was the greatest guy in the world. And why not? He had gotten exactly what he

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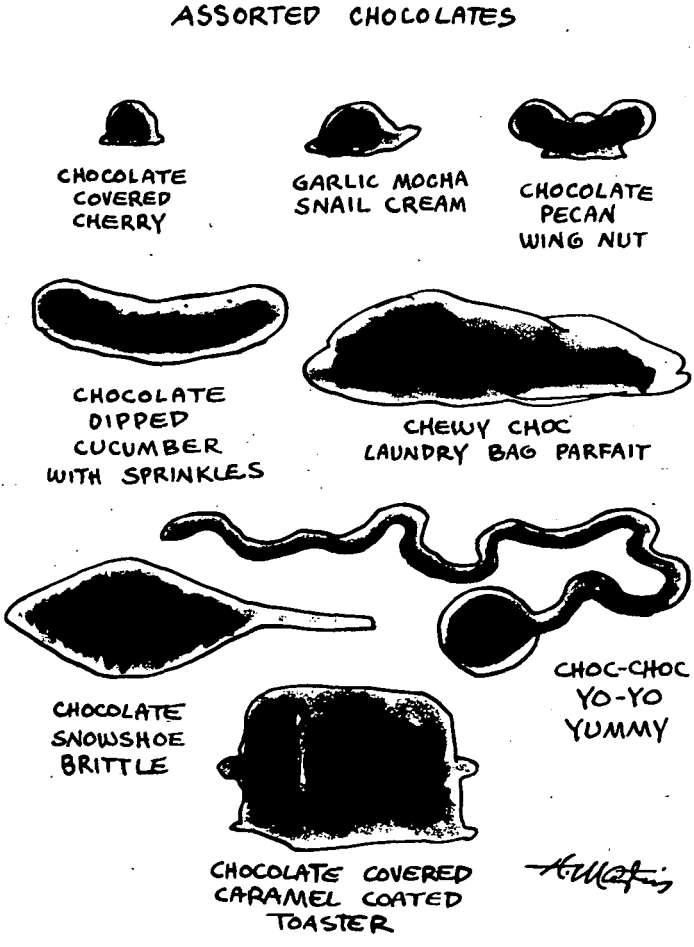
had come for. I sent him off to get his things.

You know, maybe Z. E. "Bubba" Beal has already gotten his prize. Joe Leone is my roommate. If that isn't hell, I don't know what is.

He'll be back soon now. Before he comes I've got to go out to the kitchen and strip the shelves. Empty the refrigerator. Load all my beautiful goodies into shopping bags and toss them into the dumpster. Then maybe I'll reread the Book Review section of the *Times*, check out the best-selling diet books. Damn!

You see, there's only one way Joe Leone is going to lose weight. I start a new diet tomorrow.



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From Paul Carter: "After publishing in your pages in 1950 and 1956, I disappeared into the wilds of academia, teaching history at the University of Montana and at Berkeley, with the last ten years spent at the University of Arizona." Mr. Carter is the author of THE CREATION OF TOMORROW, a history of magazine SF, published in 1977 by Columbia University Press.

In Excelsis

BY

PAUL A. CARTER

Inks fade. Paper crumbles. Wood rots — and besides, there's no longer much of it left. Even carved stone crumbles under the acid rain.

I have therefore taught myself to etch. I write through wax on copper plates, which I found in a long-deserted art dealer's shop. I pour acid on the scribed lines. When the acid has done its work, I take each etched plate to a deep, dry place I know where neither moth nor rust will corrupt, and where the High Secret Service — I hope and pray — will not break through and steal.

For this story needs to be told.

I don't even know if it will have an eventual reader, or indeed if it will be readable. Rosetta Stones are as rare as the genius to decipher them. Information retrieval will have been long dead; but who knows whether the computer, that special technical-social outgrowth of a particular kind of civilization, will ever be reinvented?

I shall deposit a few of the simpler mathematical keys — leading up to a frequency table for the Roman alphabet as arranged in English words — on a separate plate nearby. Maybe I'll carve that one into the rock. From then on, unknown reader to come, you're on your own.

My country — one of two great world empires near the end of the twentieth century (see adjoining table, for explanation of the way we reckoned time) — had been unusual in world history. Except for a few assassinations, and one grievous, bitter civil war, its politics had on the whole been nonviolent. Its people had elected their national leaders — their presidents — in peaceful ceremonies each quadrennium for over two hundred years. Of course as our expanding commerce in

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goods and ideas came up against the Other Empire's similarly growing sphere, the range of political choices became narrower. Leaders, present and potential, began to anticipate and steer the urges of their electors, so that the election day decision recorded every fourth November very often was no real decision at all.

In particular, most political leaders considered it important not to achieve genuine concord and understanding with the Other Empire. (I write this more in sorrow than in anger; the Other Empire's leaders were just as unreasonable as ours — and *they* were not even nominally chosen by popular vote.) Nor, after a brief, mid-century flurry of establishing something we hopefully named the "United Nations," did the statecraft of either empire consider the option of merging its parochial affairs under a planetwide World-State. Instead, we relegated the peoples neither we nor the Other Empire could dominate to a limbo we both called the "Third World."

Then came the last of our presidents.

I went to work for him when he was yet unknown. To me, personally, he has been more than generous; and if his High Secret Service ever finds this document, he will doubtless think it further proof of my ingratitude.

But if that should happen, you — whoever you are — will, of course, not be reading these words.

The carefully planned campaign that eventually put him in the White House was a masterpiece of what we used to call *public relations*, a curse from which I hope your civilization of the unknown future has been spared. Like the Great Communicator of 1980, he was a former entertainer in the electronic media; like the Slain Young Hero of 1960, he ran for president while he was still young.

In his successful, long-running Tri-D show, he had regularly slipped a humanely liberal political message past that entertainment medium's illiberal owners. As he moved toward the seat of power, however, he subtly convinced the corporate forces of the nation that he was "safe," yet his liberal Tri-D audience never lost its enthusiam for him. He touched all the right bases among the divided, alienated masses who detested each other's economic and ethnic subcultures only less than they detested the Other Empire.

At the cheering, weeping national convention that nominated him for president, he chose as his running mate a candidate who was, at that historical moment, ideal: half-black, half-Hispanic, and female. Then, in the course of the formal campaign, he played his masterstroke: they became "running mates" literally; he married her. It was the only logical way to resolve the suspense of the previous decade and a half, when he had been our nation's most eligible — but, of course, not celibate — bachelor.

The other political party — tradi-

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tionally we had always had two — threw in the towel and concurred with wild enthusiasm in his — their — nomination. Political scientists wisely pointed out that a use had finally been found for the running mate after the election; the job could now be combined with that of First Lady, none of whose incumbents had ever previously drawn a salary. Hastily improvised third, fourth and fifth parties — those, too, in our politics, were a tradition, though a minor one — drew off a scattering of nuisance votes, but on election day the candidate and his lady "carried," as we used to say, each and every one of the administrative entities formerly known as states.

I had the honor, as I sincerely believed at the time, of composing both the acceptance speech and the inaugural address. I had nothing to do, however, with the memorandums that embodied the president's true intentions.

Probably none were ever written down.

I began to sense what was really afoot when a Secret Service man (they were not the *High* Secret Service, then) beckoned me urgently from my privileged seat on the inauguration platform. The eloquent words continued to roll over our heads from loudspeakers as we walked — quickly, but not obviously — behind the line of stiffly standing marines to a waiting black limousine. A door opened, and a firm, warm hand seized mine and drew me in. The hand, to my utter confoundment, was that of the running mate/First Lady.

I stopped, halfway into the vehicle, in sheer astonishment. The Secret Service man pushed me from behind. I practically fell across the vice-president's famously entrancing legs into the space that had been left between her and the president himself.

"Hello, John," he said, smoothly covering my embarrassment.

Muffled though it was by bullet-proof glass, I could still hear the sonorous voice that echoed over the Capital lawn.

"But you," I stupidly said, "you're *up there.*"

He smiled; his winning, just-for-you-alone Tri-D smile. "Did you ever see so perfect a hologram?"

The First Lady laughed; infectiously, as was her way. The joke was on me, I thought, as the silent automobile swept out around and behind the Capitol.

But not just on me. The joke was on the whole world.

In front of the broad steps leading up to the Supreme Court, a VTOL stood poised, fans whirring. Hands drew us gently but urgently from the car and helped us in. As I fumbled with my seat belt, the aircraft jumped at the sky.

A great dark shape loomed through the lowering clouds. I had never seen one, but I recognized it from old pictures: a dirigible airship. The VTOL

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rattled my teeth as it thumped into a docking cradle. Shortly we were walking —promenading, actually — through a spacious observation car under the airship's dinosaurian bulk.

At the end of the car, a large Tri-D was turned on, tuned — like all other such instruments outside the Other Empire — to the inaugural address. We had been in transit for only a few minutes; the speech had yet a while to go. I watched the incredibly lifelike simulacrum mouth the words I had written for the president. They still sounded good.

Beside me the president flashed me a look of concern. Then his face grew stern. He drew forth a pocketphone and spoke into it: "Now."

The armed forces — alerted, I later learned, on the stroke of noon just as the new president had put his hand on the Bible — swept into action.

You, future reader, may know from archaeological reconstruction what happened next, better than I do. Situated as we were, we got accurate bulletins only for the first hour. Quick, surgical strikes all along the coast of rebellious South America, and a major thrust by our naval forces based in the Indian Ocean up into the Persian Gulf; these, I know, are history. But when our paratroops started to rain down on the Oil States, the Other Empire evidently decided that that was enough. Their great transport planes swooped in low over the oil fields and air-dropped their newest tanks, which promptly shot our troops to pieces.

The president, grave yet with a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth, picked up the dreaded red telephone.

A few minutes later, the blow of a shock wave from directly below struck our deck and threw us all on the floor. Struts screamed, and specially designed springs surged sickeningly up and down. The great gas-filled hulk above us shook from stem to stern. It rolled, pitched, bucked, yielded — but it held together and rode out the wave. I saw why the president had chosen this archaic vessel for refuge, rather than Air Force Super One.

Through the sheltering clouds we glimpsed the cancerous, spreading top of the fireball that rose from Washington.

"Our space stations should have caught *anything* headed for Washington. One of their subs must have got into Chesapeake Bay in spite of everything," the president mused, half to himself. "Maybe even up the Potomac. Damn."

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, standing nearby, added his own footnote to history: "Too bad about the inauguration day parade."

Very shortly we lost contact with what was going on. The script was clear enough, and had been for fifty years: if they do *that*, we will do *this*. But nothing human could long have guided so fantastically powerful and complex a war machine as that one

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was. After the initial commands — and the inevitable response from the Other Empire — it raged like a typhoon or a forest fire, out of control. Until the accompanying electromagnetic surge wiped out all guidance systems, the dirigible headquarters from which the president choreographed our steps in the dance of death should have been a sitting duck for even the most primitive of missiles. But that danger abated as pulse after electronic pulse rolled outward from the ignited bombs, blowing relays, fouling circuitry, shattering tuned crystals, and reducing sophisticated microchips to useless pebbles. Our planetwide communications network popped like a bubble. That, too, had been prepared for; by nightfall on that terrible day, our national forces were fully in touch with the commander in chief and with one another using semaphore, gasoline-fired carbon arc searchlights, illuminated signal flags, and — at the next daybreak — heliograph mirrors. *How much* the Day had been prepared for I realized when I learned that most of the dirigible's picked crew (equally divided between males and females) knew, in addition to their many other skills, the long-disused Morse code.

What happened then to my heart and mind is not, future reader, something I care to write down. Sufficient to say that I, like everyone else aboard that gasbag in the clouds, left in the murk below a family and other people with whom I shared love.

Many among us survivors got roaring drunk on the photo lab's ethanol. Some used other substances. I refused the paramedics' frequent kind offers to tranquilize my pain; I did not want to care. I found a place, at the end of the corridor between the gas compartments, where I could be alone.

The president was worried about me. He was worried about all of us; we were so few. And in those first bleak hours and days, several did in fact achieve suicide. At the president's instruction, I hastily revised the Order for Burial at Sea from the *Book of Common Prayer*. We dropped their bodies through a hatchway — which was then sealed lest others of us use it for an easy two-kilometer jump. Then I went back into my chosen cocoon.

It was not alone my working body the president wanted, but my willing and active mind. Several times in the passing days and weeks, he summoned me from my lair to write explanatory papers — how what he had done was in response to the enemy's aggression; that kind of thing. But my heart was not in it. The campaign, I felt — when I was able to feel at all — was at last over.

When I did not come to mess, they brought me food on trays. Usually I ate; for it is a trait in survivors, however stricken, that they seek to continue to survive. Friends climbed the ladder to my corridor and visited me; once the president sent up a favorite book. Twice, also, members of the

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High Secret Service — as it was now called — came clanking in and made threats and demands. They stopped when they saw that I truly did not give a damn.

One night a great windstorm took the airship and shook it like a bird in a cat's mouth. Muffled shouts came to me through the lower decks. The corridor tilted giddily. Something banged and thumped on the next deck below as it broke loose and rolled around. To me from the ship's skin, not far above my head, came the hiss and spatter of rain.

From the corridor's other end, a ghostly figure in white glided toward me.

I am not superstitious, but a coldness stirred at my back and the tired heart muscle smote me like a fist.

"John?"

The hood dropped away from the face.

The running mate came several noiseless paces closer. The white flannel slipped from her splendid shoulders and drifted to the floor.

I could not speak.

That did not matter.

She stepped lithely in against me, warm, hungry.

The wind and the rain blew and beat at the airship, and we lay together in my wool blanket on the cold deck, in peace and joy.

After I had slept, and woke to find her gone, I became aware that in this matter, as always, she had done the president's bidding. As, in all matters, did we all.

And his therapy worked.

When he sent for me again, I went willingly, and I moved my few possessions from my hall of chosen exile back down with the rest of the crew.

"I've got a job for you, John." The president pointed to a small cabin suspended just forward of the great promenade deck. "That's going to be your library and study. You were a damn fine speechwriter, and now you're going to be the world's best — and last — historian."

I fantasized of assassination. But I nodded and thanked him. I dared not look at the First Lady.

When I saw her thereafter, she was flanked by High Secret Service men.

My study became a place of comfort. The shelves overflowed with microfilm reels, magnetic tapes, floppy discs, and just plain books. I had again underestimated our leader's intellect; he had chosen well.

Soon I was hard at work on *The Rise and Fall of the Two World Empires.* Most of what I wrote on the Other Empire was pure conjecture; and much of what I wrote on ours was pure recollection. For the computer would no longer read its discs, and the microfilm cracked and broke, and many of the videotapes were blank.

I do not know why, with this ruination of our machines as a sign of how deep the nuclear scourge had been, we had not all simply died of radiation.

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But we didn't. There were a few cases of anemia, and one or two people lost their hair. That was all.

"We have been spared," said the president on one of his frequent visits to me. He came alone; it was a sign of his courage — or his contempt — that he felt no need of the High Secret Service when confronting the one other man on the ship who had known, in the bibical sense, his wife. "We have been spared, and science or history cannot explain so great a miracle."

He riffled the pages I had just written. "I want you to put this by for now, John, and work on something else."

His expressive hands pulled down books from a shelf at which I had scarcely glanced. The world's scriptures: the Bible, the Gita, the *Tao Te Ching*, the Lotus Sutra, the Koran.

"Surely divine providence alone has spared us; we are a remnant of God's Israel," he declaimed. I started; it was a tone I had never heard from him before. One of his forebears, I recalled from an early (and soon suppressed) campaign biography, had been a born-again Christian faith healer and evangelist. "God has swept the earth clean and allowed us to make a fresh start. I want you to purge from these books all the sectarian passages — all those dogmas of the dead past that set nation against nation in religious wars — and compile from what is left a Bible of the Whole World."

It was a tough, exacting assignment. Editing out of those books all their exclusive prophetic claims cut out also much of what gave them their literary muscle and their universal appeal. I set to work with enthusiasm. The story of Noah's Ark I kept, of course; it fit our situation perfectly. The passage from Bhagavad-Gita, which had already been used in early-atomic times by nuclear scientists, about the radiance brighter than a thousand suns. Confucius's invented version of the Golden Rule, which seemed to me more tactful than the Judeo-Christian version. Bits of the Book of Mormon that hinted at North America as the site of humanity's future religious destiny....

Meanwhile, the president's airship was remaking contact with the world below.

At first there were short, furtive flights to previously amassed caches of fuel and food. We lost three VTOL pilots in that phase; casualties of radiation poisoning, despite all precautions and despite transfusions from our precious stock of whole blood. Their deaths were a small sign of how wretched must be the rest of the earth, where — as one of the Other Empire's leaders had warned in a brief moment of world sanity thirty years before — after a war waged with such weapons, the living would envy the dead.

Time passed, and the planet began to heal. Geigering the terrain beforehand, expeditions touched down, finding grasses and weeds; mesquite and

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creosote brush, again smelling tarry-sweet after rain; crayfish and sunfish, sparrows and blind bats, termites and mice.

And people.

A pygmy village in equatorial Africa. Nomads in the desert Middle East. A town of French-speaking *habitants* in Quebec. The old U.S. settlement in Antarctic at McMurdo, and New Zealand's Scott Base one mile away. A floating ice colony north of Novaya Zemlya. A grain-growing kolkhoz in the Ukraine. An Iowa pig farm. A monastery in Nepal. A thousand-year-old Hopi town in Arizona. Over each, after a visit from what remained of the armed forces — bringing medicines, precision tools, seed grain — flew the presidental flag.

From what the president was now doing, I saw what he had intended all along. We, in our airship, deploying the pitiful remnant of our military, were the sole remaining focus of planetwide social order. With both the old empires gone, the way could now be paved for a unified, peaceful World-State. The price — *he* believed — was not too much to pay.

I was right in this surmise about his purpose. But I was also wrong.

On the morning of the first anniversary of the Final War, he came to my study and looked over all the pages I had written. The sources from which I had worked, however, he said, must be destroyed.

The conditioning of the librarian is strong. I saw the logic of his purpose, but just the same that command struck me like a physical blow.

He stayed and watched while I opened a porthole — we were cruising low over the gunmetal-blue Pacific — and dropped through it, one after another, all the holy scriptures of the world.

Nothing had been said, yet, about our secular heritage. Remembering that Plato had written that all poets and musicians must be banished as disruptive influences from any ideal Republic, I resolved at the first opportunity to hide in the ship's upper reaches my copies of *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* and *War and Peace.*

I was never to have that opportunity.

Later that day we gathered on the Great Promenade to celebrate our continuing life and to commemorate our dead.

At the president's request, I read from the new, still-handwritten Whole World Bible: the passage about mankind created in diverse nations, "so that ye might know one another," from the Koran; the swords beaten into plowshares and the lion lying down with the lamb, from Isaiah; the Buddha's advice that to feel anger against one who does us wrong is futile, "like spitting against the wind." All — artfully, as I thought in my intellectual vanity — blended into one testament appropriate for those who remained of humankind.

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Then *he*, motioning me to step aside, produced a big, black leather-bound, red-and-gold-edged book, and laid it on the lectern. One conventional Bible, after all, had survived. Upon it he had been inaugurated one year before, and from it he had launched his cleansing crusade.

The president cleared his throat — the only time I have ever known him to use that self-diminishing gesture. If his nerve faltered for a moment, however, he quickly recovered, as his familiar, compelling baritone sounded out the ancient words.

I knew where they came from; in my manuscript I had censored them out. Why was he saying them now?

"To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time; for the day of their calamity is at hand...."

In his eyes flashed something I had never seen there before: the dark flame of fanaticism.

"Ye know that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive, I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand." The voice rose higher, and the last words came out almost in a shriek: "For I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, *I live forever!*"

Dead, dreadful silence.

The president closed up the big book with a thump.

Two from the High Secret Service, a man and a woman, slid open the trap in the floor. The president carried the Bible over and dropped it through.

"Today," he said, more quietly, "this scripture is fulfilled in your ears."

The High Secret Service pair still knelt, facing each other across the trap like acolytes.

One by one, all over the Great Promenade, men and women were dropping to their knees.

Awkwardly, I stood facing the president. All around me others knelt, in a decorous rush. Then, somehow, my simple hesitation mutated into an act of rebellion. My legs trembled but I remained standing.

Behind me came a curse, and the thwack of a long club across my shoulders. *"Kneel!"*

"No."

I am a bookish recluse; not a courageous person at all. But the words of another who had defied priestcraft, hundreds of years ago, roared in my mind. *Here I stand; God help me, I can do no other.*

The president's face was twisted and dark. With visible effort he got himself under control. Wordless, he signaled.

The High Secret Service hustled me away.

The last I saw of the president was his hands, no longer shaking in rage but outstretched in benediction; and from the worshipping crowd rose a great sigh.

My library/study, its entry hatch dogged down from above, made an ef-

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fective temporary jail.

The night hours crawled and sped away — crawled in forced idleness; sped toward rendezvous with my death.

The drycell-operated buzzer on my desk shattered a brief doze. I groped for the simple sound-powered phone that had replaced more high-tech forms of communication.

"John." The filter robbed her voice of its sultriness.

I could not speak.

"John, please *listen* to me. They watch me all the time; I can't come to you. But here in my private meditation chamber they leave me alone. Even *he* leaves me alone."

"I'm here," I hoarsely whispered. *Yes, my last love, I am here. Why must you torment me so?*

"He wants you put to death, tomorrow."

"I know."

"Next day he's going to proclaim me Queen of Heaven. *Me*—" The voice hardened and coarsened, as I had never heard it before. "Me, that started out as a carhop in Vegas!"

She hesitated. "I — I am carrying his child. His children. Twins. Tests say a boy and girl. When they are born, he'll proclaim that *they* are God."

I knew, from the world's long religious past, what that would mean in history. Divinely married brother and sister, and then an Egyptain dynasty that would go on and on in stagnant horror.

"We have only one card left to play," she went on, fiercely. "*You* must get away, to tell the truth to the world. In a minute, or less — Oh! my dearest John — I do love you—"

Within that minute, the explosive bolts holding my cabin to the dirigible went off. The room shuddered, then dropped like an express elevator. The phone lines tore away.

And then a bang! And a jerking stop, and a slower downward drift as a white parachute bloomed above.

The rest is quickly told. She must have gleaned, from the course plotted in the chart room, a time when the airship would pass over a radiation-free zone. I landed in the main street of an entire deserted town, fortuitously spared from the storm of nuclear flame, that looked like the false front for a Western film. The big parachute slowly draped itself down; one corner of it, flapping in the wind, caught and held an antique saloon swinging door.

Somehow I summoned the strength to shove and drag the prison cabin into an empty hay-strewn barn so that it would be out of sight from the air. The precaution was unneeded; nothing has since crossed the empty sky save an occasional soaring crow.

I have wondered why they do not pursue me. The mere existence of a getaway heretic would seem a threat to the president's new moral universe.

Her hold over him must be like iron.

I must incise this wax-coated plate

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and hide it away. For all dynasties, sooner or later, must fall. But religions often outlast the civilizations that nurture them. Consider the respective fates of the Caliphate and Islam; of the Hindu Raj and Buddhism; of the Roman Empire and Christianity.

After the president's dynasty falls, our world must not be forever ruled by a religion that was born not of love but of genocide.

And so it is supremely important that this be written down:

The president is *not* God.

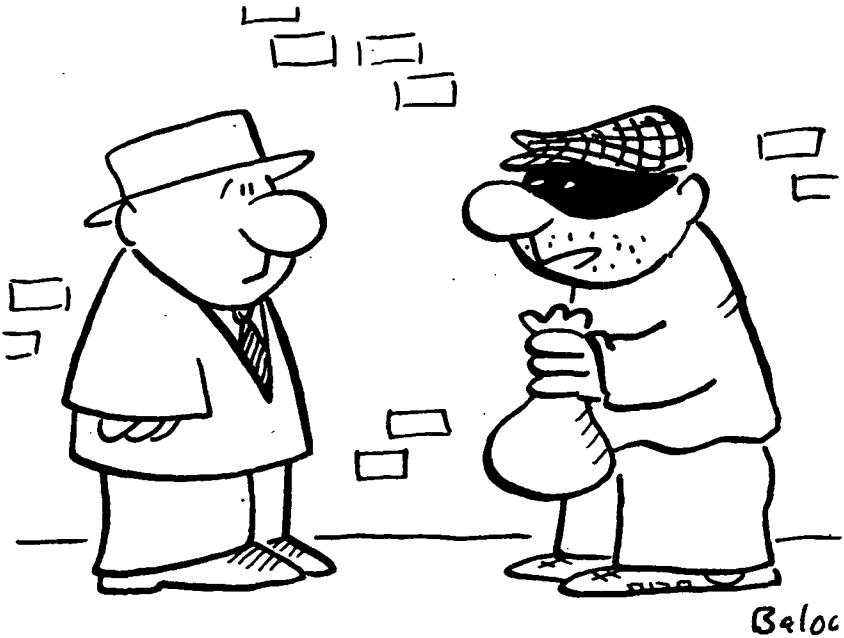
His wife is *not* the Queen of Heaven.

Those children will *not* be born as a new incarnation of God on a ruined earth.

The president is a man, like other men. He will die, as all men die.

He has used his wife for his own purposes, making her an instrument of his ambition, as other men have.

And lastly, reader to come — "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." I believe, though I cannot know or prove, that her children will be not his, but my own.



"Hand over your wallet, or I'll dump this bag of nuclear waste over your head."

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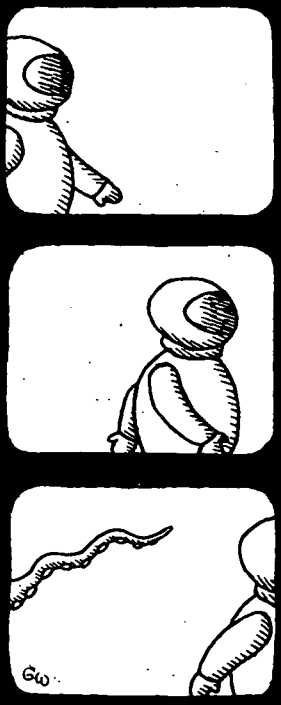
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



ECHOLALIAC ECTOPLASM

I'm the dogged sort, and a completist. I'm going to review all the pertinent series of this season if it kills me, and it just might. "Died of a surfeit of prime time television in the line of duty" the epitaph will read. Only one show premiered too late for inclusion last month, luckily, so it looks like I'll survive this year, unless the networks throw in some last minute replacements, which they're already threatening to do (*Manimal*, reviewed last month, has already bit the dust, though there's ominous talk of reviving it later in the the year).

The late entry is *Jennifer Slept Here*, a half-hour sitcom that is a shameless re-echo of *Topper* (see last month's column for repetitive commentary on the tiresome influence of Topper's creator, Thorne Smith). In the original we have the glamorous, ghostly Marion Kirby, a chic sophisticated shade who, with husband and dog, comes back to haunt the inhibited uptight banker, Cosmo Topper. In the current incarnation, we have the glamorous, ghostly Jennifer Farrell, a defunct movie star, who returns to haunt an inhibited, uptight adolescent who, with his family, has moved into her former abode.

If Jennifer had been from another era entirely (an old time movie queen something like Carol Burnett's wonderful takeoff on *Sunset Boulevard*, for instance), some humor might have

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have been found in the situation. Alas, Jennifer kicked off only 6 years ago, so we fall back on the usual jokes of Joey seeming to talk to himself a lot, since he's the only one (usually) who can see her.

The saving grace for *Jennifer Slept Here* is the people involved; they are a bit more engaging than the usual sitcom lot and manage, at times, to rev up a tired situation. Ann Gillian is egocentrically charming, and very beautiful, as Jennifer; John P. Navin Jr. actually provides a little depth and pathos to what could have been the usual adolescent nerd; and the wonderful Georgia Engel (of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*) flutters about with sweet vagueness as the mother of the family, and steals the show, as always.

Videowares dept. ... There's been no room for months to update current releases of interest in the home video area, so the backlog is staggering. Here are a few that warrant particular attention, since they weren't initially covered in this space (due to the annoying habit that movie companies have of releasing *all* their s/f and fantasy films at specific times of the year):

Beast Master is one of those disposable sword and sorcery, thew and thong stories inevitably spawned by *Conan, the Bomb*. Peaceful agricultural village is wiped out by barbaric-type barbarians (always a good opener), son of village chief survives to wander in wilderness making friends and influencing people until the chance comes to have at the nasty barbarians and wander on, in search of destiny and (if the book/film does well) sequels.

The gimmick in *Beast Master* is that the young hero (played by Marc Singer, who has talent to match his physique when given the chance — he wasn't, here) has an uncanny rapport with animals; he's sort of Muscles Doolittle and collects fauna (panthers, etc.) the way a ship collects barnacles. I don't quite know how so slim a plot could be rendered as circuitous as it is (the film seems as long as *The Winds of War*), but some of the photography is very handsome, and the movie is stolen by two ferrets. There's a shot near the end of one of them touching noses with the panther that, calculated as it is, is worth the price of the cassette.

Poltergeist is the story of a family from a Fab commercial invaded by an unpleasant presence that seems to lurk in the TV set, stacks up kitchen chairs, and kidnaps the dear little tot of the household (they deserve each other). An idea of the general sense of the film is given by the fact that it is specifically stated therein that a haunting is connected with a place and a poltergeist is connected with a person. The supernatural manifestation in *Poltergeist* is absolutely connected with the house (more correctly, the ground on which it is built, an ex-cemetary), therefore, of course, they called the movie *Poltergeist*.

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Something Wicked This Way Comes is Ray Bradbury's script from Ray Bradbury's novel, set in the 1930s Midwest which is presented so nostalgically that it *has* to be mythical. Into a small town of this time and place comes a carnival of evil, run by a Mr. Dark. He and his minions grant people their wishes, but exact terrible prices in return (the school teacher who was a beauty in her youth regains that beauty, but is struck blind). Two young boys set themselves against this wickedness, eventually aided by the father of one, the town librarian.

This is an odd film. On one hand there is the usual Bradbury fuzziness and some horrendously pretentious dialogue, as well as an ending maudlin as only Bradbury can be maudlin. On the other, it's directed by Jack Clayton, who a generation ago gave us one of the truly frightening films of all times, *The Innocents*. So it's beautifully photographed, reeks of atmosphere, and Clayton again demonstrates, as in the earlier film, his way with juvenile actors. And the fuzzy ambiguity of it is a curious sort of relief after the past ten years of horror films mostly devoted to people being chopped up as nauseatingly as possible. Here is a flim aiming to scare you with guile, not goo, and even if it doesn't quite succeed, it's a damn good try. It is certainly worth an evening's rental.

Space Hunter, reviewed here five months ago, is also available on video cassette.

Coming soon

Next month: part one of a two-part novel, a thriller with a real difference, concerning a U.S.-Soviet confrontation and starring a nuclear powered steam aircraft. Don't miss **Hilbert Schenck's** STEAM BIRD in the April issue.

Soon: brand new novellas by **Stephen King, Frederik Pohl** and **Marion Zimmer Bradley.** See the coupon on page 158.

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This story is the first professional sale for Brad Denton, who writes: "I'm 25, married, no kids, one computer, with a 1980 B.A. in astronomy and English from Kansas University, 'The Music of the Spheres' is one of five SF stories that make up my M.A. thesis; I've been fortunate to have James Gunn as my adviser on the project..."

The Music of the Spheres

BY

BRADLEY DENTON

"I'm schizophrenic, Lynne," Bobby said as his scan spun out of the printer. It bothered me to hear him say it, because I'd sometimes thought it of him myself. Now, with the possible evidence appearing in bright colors, I wasn't sure I wanted to face it.

Not that it mattered to me if he was somehow different. Bobby was Bobby and always had been. I didn't like the thought of him putting himself through chemical therapy or surgery, so I didn't want him to think that there was anything wrong with him.

The inkjets stopped hissing, and the tractor feed rolled the scan out to where I could tear off the sheet. I smoothed it out on my desk and studied it while Bobby peered over my shoulder.

The frontal lobe did show an abnormal pattern of glucose metabolism; the blotchy, almost surreal blobs of red and yellow clearly didn't correspond to the "normal" positron emission tomography brain scan Rhys and Keller were using as a standard. But neither did it correspond to the standard "schizophrenic" profile.

"You've got an unusual pattern here," I said hesitantly. I didn't want to say anything at all, but I had known Bobby too long to try to get away with silence or a lie. "But it doesn't mean anything's wrong."

That was true enough. The purpose of the study wasn't to identify brain disorders; it was to accumulate enough data from enough different subjects that the term "brain disorder" would take on a more concrete meaning. Even the "normal," "schizophrenic," "manic," and "psychopathic" standards were only guesses in a sense. The people they'd been taken from fit the labels, but nobody could say that the scans absolute-

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ly identified them as such. We couldn't be certain, for example, that the pattern identified as "schizophrenic" might not also show up in somebody with a less serious problem — or completely different — problem.

So the fact that Bobby's scan didn't correspond to the "normal" standard didn't necessarily mean that he was "abnormal." At that stage of the study, all it meant was that his brain chemistry did things differently than the brain chemistry of the person the "normal" scan had been taken from.

But I was bothered by what I saw. I couldn't remember ever seeing a scan look quite the way his did. No two were alike, but there were several basic patterns that recurred over and over again. Bobby's didn't fit any of them. He had read the literature I'd given him, so when he'd seen the odd configuration in the frontal lobe, he'd naturally remembered that schizophrenics tend to have decreased metabolism in that area. But Bobby's scan showed "hot spots" of high activity and streaks and rays that seemed to emanate from these spots. I didn't look at the EEG I'd taken earlier because I didn't want to see if it was just as strange.

For a moment I considered showing the scan to Dr. Rhys, or even Dr. Keller. But it was late, and I was the only one there. The center's official hours had been over long ago, and I'd stayed late to catch up on my work and do Bobby's scan. He couldn't come during the day. If he'd been able to, then maybe Rhys or Keller would've performed the scan and decided that more testing and investigation were needed. I was only the research assistant, though, and I doubted that they'd pay attention to anything I thought was unusual.

Just as well. After all, this was Bobby's brain I was staring at. I didn't want anyone making a guinea pig out of him.

While mildly chiding Bobby for his evaluation of himself, I sealed the hard copy of the scan in clear plastic and labeled it: No. 324, Male, Cauc., 22 yrs. Then I put it into the file cabinet where it would live in limbo until Rhys got to it. Finally, I shut down the scanner, computer, and printer, and gave Bobby his ten bucks.

He smiled his thin, ambiguous smile and asked me if ten bucks was the going rate for schizos. Trying hard to be upbeat, I told him that they usually got only eight. Those who were required to take the technician out for a beer got two extra.

It was lame, but it got us off campus and into a downtown Lawrence bar. Bobby picked it; it was a strange, dark little hole on the second story of an ancient limestone building. I'd never been there before. The place looked and smelled like a cave, and the bare stones of the wall next to our table were cool and damp. It reminded me of the rock shelves by the creek where Bobby and I had played as kids, and I

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told him so. He said he'd thought of that, too.

At first we didn't say much as we drank our beers, but we didn't have to. He knew me well enough to know that I was worried about him. He'd dropped out of school over a year ago and had been supporting himself by busing tables since then. He was a marvelous pianist, and several of his professors had predicted great things for him. But he'd stopped going to classes, and they'd had no choice but to flunk him. I still don't know why he'd done it. I wanted to.

After three beers, he said, "Focus. I need to be able to focus myself. That's what I've always needed."

His words caught me by surprise, because I'd been talking about my problems with Peter — small talk, really, just to avoid harassing Bobby about how he was living — and had said nothing that could have logically preceded them. Yet as he spoke he looked at me as if he were answering a question I'd asked.

"Focus," I repeated, stupidly. The taste of beer was mingling with the damp-cave smell and seemed to be drugging me.

He nodded. "I've used you as an excuse for too long. I've been clinging to you ever since I was a kid. But I've got to stop now. You're not my mother. You're not even my sister."

I swallowed more beer and tried to decipher his sentences through the mild buzz in my head. "I might as well be," I think I said then.

He gave me that smile again. "I know. But I can't see you so much from now on. If I do, I'll never learn to focus myself."

He had more to say, but I waved my hand awkwardly to stop him. "If I'm going to make any sense out of this," I told him, "you've got to explain what you mean by 'focus.' "

He tried to do that, but he couldn't quite say it so that it was coherent to me. At the time I thought it was the beer doing it.

But whatever he meant by "focus," he felt that he needed to depend on himself more than on me. I was a crutch.

He was careful to add that he couldn't bear the thought of not seeing me at all. He just didn't want to keep on meeting me every day or every other day the way he'd been doing since he'd quit school.

I agreed because it sounded reasonable. He needed to stand on his own a little. And I needed to work on my relationship with Peter.

So we parted that night with a long, hard hug. For the first time in months we didn't set up a specific time to get together again.

I took the long way home on back streets even though I wasn't really too drunk to risk driving the main drags. In fact, I was dead cold sober despite the dull buzz. Bobby wanted to stay away for a while. It sounded good at

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the bar, but now I wondered if I'd be able to avoid worrying about him. On the other hand, lately I'd been as worried about my own life as about his.

By the time I got home I'd kicked things around so much that I didn't feel much of anything except tired. All I wanted to do was curl up and sleep.

It was after one when I stepped into the apartment, and I wondered why most of the lights were still on. Peter never stayed up past midnight.

"Lynne, that you?" Peter's voice called from the bedroom.

"Who else?" I said dully. "What're you doing up?"

He stepped out of the bedroom fully dressed, looking at me as if I'd just killed someone.

"You know it's almost two?" he said. "You said you'd be back by eleven."

I shrugged off my jacket and headed for the bathroom. "Sorry," I mumbled. The buzz had become a steady drone that made everything seem as if it were being played to me on a faulty television set.

Peter followed me into the bathroom. Normally I reacted violently to that, but this time I couldn't work up the energy to care.

"You weren't with your little friend, were you?" he said. Accusation and derision mingled in his voice and should have had me up and fighting. Instead, though, I squeezed toothpaste onto my brush and began to methodically scrub my teeth.

"You still claim nothing's going on?" Peter said.

I spat into the sink. "I've told you a hundred times," I muttered. "He's like a brother. I worry about him. We grew up together. That's all there is to it."

Peter laughed sardonically. "You've been worrying over him until two in the morning? I don't buy it. Not this time."

He paused as if he wanted me to say something, but I kept brushing my teeth. Somewhere inside, I wondered at myself. Why was I so dull, so unfeeling? Why wasn't I reacting?

Peter sucked in deep breath, and I looked at him with a feeling of detachment greater than I'd ever experienced before. He was gorgeously attractive — tall, deep-chested, wavy chestnut hair, clear blue eyes — but at that moment he might as well have been a potted plant.

"Lynne, I love you," he said solemnly, "but I'm going to leave if you don't stop seeing this guy. If you want him instead, O.K., fine, just say so. But you can't have me, too. I've got two suitcases packed and the third one half-full. D'you want me to finish or to stay here?"

I spat again and tried to think of something to say. Nothing came.

"You going to stop seeing him or not?" he said.

I rinsed my mouth, spat one last time, and moved around him to the door, unbuttoning my blouse to get ready for bed.

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"You hear me, Lynne? You going to stop?"

I walked into the bedroom and shed the rest of my clothes. I knew I should take a shower but decided to wait until morning.

Peter's suitcases were on the bed, so I carried them into the living room before getting into bed and pulling the covers up close around my neck.

"I'm asking one last time," Peter said, standing in the doorway. "Are you going to stop—"

"No," I said.

He turned off the light then and closed the door. I could hear him struggling with his suitcases for a while, and then the front door slammed. A minute or two later his Datsun sputtered underneath my window.

I didn't think I really wanted him to go, but I couldn't work up enough emotion to go down and fight with him or ask him to stay. And I knew that all I would have to do was tell him what Bobby had said about not seeing me so much. He didn't really want to leave — the packed suitcases had been a bluff. But when I hadn't reacted according to the script, he'd had to follow through. He was probably cursing himself right now. He wasn't so bad, really; he'd just never learned to control his jealousy.

I listened to the Datsun idle for what must have been ten or fifteen minutes. It was spring, and the thing didn't need to warm up at all. He was waiting for me to come down.

The engine noise finally shifted tone and moved away. Almost eight months after he'd moved in, Peter was gone.

I found myself thinking that I was the one who was schizophrenic. For a long time it had seemed as if seeing Bobby drained me of all emotion. There was no joy or sadness after being with him, simply a blank. And wasn't that what happened to chronic schizophrenics? Didn't the peaks and valleys of their emotions level out into a constant flat plain no matter what their rational minds wanted them to do or feel?

I turned over onto my right side and saw the rose Peter had brought me the day before silhouetted against the pale white glow from the streetlight. I tried hard to smell it and finally succeeded, but its smell wasn't that of a rose. It was the dustier, more bitter smell of a sunflower like the ones Bobby had brought me when we were kids.

I think he gave me the first one on my eighth birthday. That means he must have been six, in first grade. We were friends because we both lived out of town and our houses were only a quarter mile apart. Neither of us had any brothers or sisters, so that probably had something to do with it, too. Bobby came over a lot since his father liked to work overtime. His mother had died when he was three.

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He brought me the flower when he came to wait for the bus with me. "Happy Birthday," he said, and held it out. I took it without any great feeling of gratitude; after all, the southeastern Kansas ditches were full of the things. But I didn't sneer at it, either. I was in third grade and Bobby was only in first. He didn't understand things like birthday presents yet. So I pretended to be thrilled and smelled it. He'd picked it on the way, and that August the dirt road was hot and dry even in the early morning. So the sunflower had a coating of dust, and I sneezed. Bobby looked at me quizzically.

I don't remember exactly how it happened, but when we got to school some kid grabbed the sunflower from me and tore off the petals. Without making a sound, Bobby attacked him.

Bobby's face was red and puffy. literally swollen with rage. I'd never seen him look that way before. I was never to see it again.

The kid he was fighting looked the same way.

A teacher would've come out to stop it eventually, but I was afraid that Bobby would be hurt by then. The other kid was a lot bigger. So I dropped my things and leaped into the middle of it, shouting, "Bobby! Stop! It was just a stupid sunflower! Stop!"

When I said "stupid sunflower," he stopped all right. He stopped and looked at me with a blank face. All the rage had vanished in an instant.

And I was fillled with the greatest sense of grief that I'd ever felt in my eight-year-old life. I started crying. Life was awful, miserable, and unfair. Nobody cared what you did for them.

In the midst of my misery I was vaguely aware that the other kid was crying, too. There was no reason for him to be bawling, though; Bobby had hardly landed a blow. But the other kid's sobs were just as pain-filled as my own.

Bobby didn't cry. He didn't make any noise at all. The rage was gone, but nothing had replaced it. He stood silently, looking at me as if I weren't there.

So when a teacher finally came out, the other kid and I were the ones who were hauled into the office.

On the bus ride home that afternoon, I told Bobby I hadn't meant what I'd said about the sunflower.

Even then he had his strange little smile. I felt a tremendous sense of relief.

"Will you get me another one, please?" I said, and felt even better.

Bobby was the only guest at my birthday party that evening. My mother gave us ice cream and cake, and afterward Bobby and I played the piano in the living room.

Neither of us could really play, but we experimented. His small fingers stretched as far as he could force them. He was trying to create chords.

The sounds he made were eerie and magical, and I felt jealous because he was so much better at it than I was.

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He wasn't impressed with himself, though.

"It's not right," he said. "I can't find it."

I didn't know what he meant.

"I can't *find* it," he said again.

He shifted to new keys and tried again. "That's *still* not it." An edge of exasperation had entered his voice.

"Still not what?" I asked, beginning to feel a little exasperated myself.

"The way sunflowers feel," he said.

I was confused.

"You know," he said. "A sound like looking at sunflowers."

He kept on trying. I still didn't know what he meant. But he was only in first grade. He probably didn't know, either.

Life wasn't as much fun after Peter left, but it wasn't as much trouble, either. I continued to work at the Psychometric Research Center on campus, and I also continued to make half-hearted attempts at getting my master's thesis into some reasonable shape. I even started dating again, a little, but the only men who asked me out were other psych people. Each of them bored me after a few hours, so I started making excuses and finally wasn't seeing anybody at all. It bothered me at first because I'd always seemed to have somebody in the past, but I eventually decided that I could use some time to myself, anyway.

And I had it. Bobby had meant what he'd said. For four months after the night of his scan, the only contact I had with him was an occasional hi-how-are-you phone call.

Then, on my birthday, I came home from work and found a slightly wilted sunflower in my mailbox. The note wrapped around the stem was an invitation to hear Bobby play that night.

The address was the bar where I'd last seen him, and that annoyed me. It wasn't the memory of what had happened that night that was disturbing, though; it was the idea of Bobby wasting his talent in a dingy, damp, moldy place like that. I considered staying home to avoid actually seeing it.

I didn't consider it very seriously. I knew I had to go. I hadn't seen him for a long time, and I hadn't heard him play for longer than that. I needed to know that he was all right and that he hadn't completely given up on himself. I hoped that would be what I'd see.

The place was even darker inside than it had been before. The only lights burning were the dim fluorescent tubes behind the bar and a pale blue haze glowing around a small stage that hadn't been there four months earlier. I could hardly see to walk, and I bumped into chairs and tables and people within a few feet of the door.

That was the first thing that surprised me. I couldn't see any faces, and the hum of conversation was low, but the place was packed with people sitting at dozens of small round tables. The musky odor from their bodies

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mingled with the sharpness of the alcohol and the dampness of the stone. As I tried to find my way to the bar, I discovered that some were even sitting on the gritty, creaking floor.

My second surprise came when a hand closed around my right biceps and a deep voice murmured into my ear.

"You Lynne Randall?" the voice from the darkness said. "We got a table by the stage for you."

I nodded dumbly and let the hand on my arm pull me through the crowd to a table left of the stage, just out of the blue haze. The table's single chair had somehow remained unoccupied.

"I'll bring you a beer," the voice said as my arm was released. A dark bulk moved away.

The stage was small, and I was close enough that I could have put my feet up on it. It was only about eight inches higher than the main floor.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness and the dim glow, I saw my third surprise.

I'd been expecting the usual night-club-pianist setup, a piano and bench with maybe a mike and small amplifier. But the stage was cluttered with so much equipment that it took me a few minutes to see exactly where the piano was.

Loops of black wire formed dark arcs in the blue light, and huge square shapes hulked at each side of the platform. A jumble of angles and curves surrounded the baby grand at the center, reminding me of unlighted downtown buildings at night.

As I stared, my depth perception failed me, and the whole array on the stage looked like an abstract silhouette cut out of black paper. I closed my eyes to try to reset my optic nerve, and when I opened them again, tiny red lights had begun to burn at random points above the stage. Startled, I moved my hands involuntarily and nearly knocked over the cold glass of beer that had materialized in front of me.

The blue glow intensified slowly, almost imperceptibly, until I could see Bobby sitting at the piano. Even in the weird light, he was unmistakable. His thin body was poised like an acrobat's, and the pale skin of his face and hands radiated a white energy.

A deep, low hum crescendoed with the blue light, and I saw that the shapes surrounding the piano were synthesizers, equalizers, and amplifiers. There was at least one microcomputer keyboard.

My first impression of all this was that Bobby had sold out his talent for electronic gimmickry. But I changed my mind when he started to play.

He began, as he always had when improvising, with a chord. It was played softly, but I could feel it vibrating in my solar plexus. It wasn't just the piano making the sound — Bobby's right hand was at the keyboard of the baby grand, but his left was playing over the keys and switches of one of

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the synthesizers. It jumped from there to the microcomputer, to another synthesizer, and back to the first. Bobby's body remained tensed before the piano, but his left hand flew around him like a white bird.

Then the chord became a chorus of trumpets, and the sounds from the stage whirled out into the crowded bodies with the force of a maelstrom.

It wasn't volume that made it a soundstorm. It was complexity; it was intensity. It was a rage in the music that throbbed out of the speakers like blood pumping from a burst artery.

I'd never known much about music theory, but I could tell the difference between good and bad. This was good.

A few minutes into the piece, I tore my eyes away from Bobby to see the crowd's reaction. If they had any taste, I was sure they'd be overwhelmed. But I also knew that bargoers generally expected certain things from a musician, and what Bobby was giving them was light-years from the usual fare. It wasn't jazz or rock or anything else that could be expected in a downtown bar.

The blue light from the stage was bright enough now that I could see some individual faces. They were more than attentive or appreciative. They were enthralled. The power and rage pulsated in their eyes.

The sound grew louder and the tempo quickened until the music was a turbulent, overwhelming cacophony. Faces twisted, and men and women rose as if the chords pulled them up. I saw fists and bottles raised.

They were going to kill each other.

I snapped my head back toward the stage to scream at Bobby to stop, but my voice was choked off. He was looking at me as he played now.

His face was emotionless. His hands still flew over the keys, but he didn't seem to be aware of them.

I looked back at the people. Most were poised to attack each other, but something held them back. Their bodies swayed as they strained against the tension.

Then the music began to relax and wane, and everyone sat down again. The piece ended on the same chord on which it had begun, and the audience clapped politely.

I sat numbly. After a long moment I drank half my beer.

The rest of Bobby's pieces that night were played as incredibly as the first, and although the crowd did not become psychotically violent again, their reactions dazed me. When the music wept, so did they. When the music swelled until it was almost sexual in intensity, they moaned. Some approached the stage like impassioned lovers. Once I looked down and saw that a woman was resting her head on the edge of the stage, staring up at Bobby. I didn't know how she'd gotten there; maybe she'd crawled. Tears streaked down the blue skin of her face. The music was too loud for me to hear her voice, but I could see her lips

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mouthing the same words over and over again: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Every time I looked up, Bobby was blankly staring toward me.

I didn't know how long the performance lasted, but when it was over, the crowd didn't stay around. They began filtering out of the door even as they applauded.

The woman who had lain with her head on the stage was an exception. She stood at the bar, clutching the edge of the counter as if she would die if she let go.

Bobby flipped a few dozen switches, and all the red lights went out. Then he stepped to the edge of the stage and extended a hand to me.

"Come on," he said.

I let him lead me up over the platform and out a back door that I hadn't seen before.

We stood on a graveled balcony that was really the roof of the store beneath us. A rusty fire escape angled down to the pavement of the public parking lot below. I felt as if I hadn't been breathing for the past hour, so I gulped in a huge lungful of warm August night air. But other than that I felt nothing at all. I was as numb and dulled as I'd been the night Peter had left.

Bobby gave me his odd little half-smile. I caught a brief glimpse of teeth flashing out of his white, sweating face.

"Well?" he said.

He'd asked me the same thing after every recital of his I'd been to. And as always, I told the truth. "I think you're wonderful. I think I almost see what you meant about focusing yourself."

He looked at me steadily. "I'm beginning to get there. But I haven't made it yet. It's still not quite right."

"The music?"

"No, not really. Me. The music is my channel. I'm trying to focus myself through it." He paused. "And once I've adjusted myself properly, everything else will follow."

I closed my eyes briefly and drew in another deep breath. Bobby's occasional mystical turns had always confused me, so to keep my thoughts straight, I usually tried to think of them in psychological terms. As a result, I'd first wondered if he was schizophrenic almost a decade before. Now I was sure he wasn't, but I didn't know how to explain what I'd seen and what I was hearing. And my emotional flatness made me wonder if my perceptions of things had any bearing at all on what really was.

"I take it back," I murmured, opening my eyes again. "I still don't know what you mean. But I know you're the most poweful musician I've ever heard. And I know that at one point in there I was scared. I've known you all your life, but a few minutes ago you and everything else around me were totally alien."

He touched my hand. "It's only me," he said.

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I tried to dredge up enough emotion to smile at him and was able to do it. For him, I was able to.

"It's just that I'm still worried about you," I said.

"I'm fine. Really. What's to worry about?"

I shrugged and tried to treat things lightly. "Oh, all that equipment, for example. How are you going to pay for it?"

He laughed softly. "As of tonight, it's paid for. That's one reason I quit school. Studying textbooks doesn't pay for a Moog."

I heard the door open behind us and looked back. The woman who had cried for Bobby stared out longingly for a few seconds and then disappeared inside again.

"You know her?" I asked.

"Not yet."

We talked for a few more minutes before I kisssed him good-bye. Then I went down the fire escape and walked to my car.

In bed that night I kept thinking of Bobby's playing. And I kept seeing the streaked face of the crying woman as she lay in the blue haze.

I didn't know if she had ever seen him before. But I knew that she now loved him with a love she could die for.

I had seen it happen one other time, when I was a senior in high school and Bobby was a sophomore.

We were still close despite the changes that adolescence made inevitable — different friends, different interests, and different reputations. For a while my parents were worried because Bobby was still coming over three or four evenings a week, and my mother even sat down with me one night and told me that she hoped I wouldn't do anything foolish. At first I didn't know what she meant and told her so. When her face grew red, I caught on and had to laugh. Bobby was fifteen and skinny with an acne problem; I was seventeen and had long since realized that I was comfortably although not spectacularly attractive. I was currently dating two of the most popular boys in school, and the fact that Mom was worried about my friendship with *Bobby* was too much to handle with a straight face.

After I stopped laughing, I explained what Bobby was to me as well as I could, and my mother nodded dubiously without saying anything. She still wasn't sure, and I couldn't understand why. Not after all the years Bobby had been my friend.

My father never voiced his own concern to me, but I knew it was different from my mother's. I overheard him telling Mom that he didn't think it was healthy for me to see so much of "a boy who plays piano all the time."

But he was even more wrong about Bobby than she was. One evening in the fall of that year, Bobby told me that he was going to ask Marcia

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Haines for a date.

I tensed up and bit my lower lip, wondering how I could tell him what I knew I should. Marcia was a senior like me, and she was beautiful. Her mind wasn't much to speak of, but of course that didn't matter. She was tall, blonde, and clear-skinned with long, tanned legs. I was considered "cute," but I knew that if Marcia and I had our eyes on the same guy, I'd better switch mine to someone else. She was head cheerleader and was going with our all-state fullback.

And here was Bobby — pale, fifteen, one hundred and one pounds — telling me that he was going to try to steal her away from the football team.

I didn't want him to suffer the ridicule that I knew was in store. Gently, I tried to tell him that Marcia was stupid, mean, and not at all worthy of him. He just stared at me with no expression.

The next afternoon I saw Bobby and Marcia holding hands between classes. My first thought was that it must be part of some cruel joke she was playing on him, but an hour later I heard the red-faced fullback telling some buddies that he was going to "kill the shrimp."

After school I tried to get to Bobby first to warn him, but the football player had already found him at the edge of the parking lot.

"Y'really ought to come on out for the team," the fullback was telling Bobby earnestly. "I mean it. You're small, but I bet you'd make a good tight end. You can run, I bet."

Bobby laughed lightly and said he'd think about it. The fullback gave him a pat on the back and walked away to practice.

Stunned, I offered Bobby a ride home as usual, but he was going for a drive with Marcia. The last I saw of him that evening was as he was riding off in the passenger seat of her Volkswagen.

Bobby and Marcia were the subjects of incredulous conversations for two weeks, and during that time Bobby didn't come over to my house at all.

Then, on an afternoon two weeks and a day after I'd first seen them holding hands, I found Marcia crying in the girls' rest room.

"He doesn't want me anymore," she sobbed. "I tried to call him last night like I always do and he hung up on me. And he didn't wait for me by the water fountain this morning like he always does."

I searched her face for signs that she was kidding and didn't find any. She was miserable. I said something about going back to the fullback, and she looked at me as if I were crazy. She loved Bobby. Passionately. Forever. But now he didn't want her, and she was going to kill herself.

I didn't believe it. But as I left I thought I saw something metallic in her hand.

I waited a few seconds and then came back just as she was starting to

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run the razor blade of a utility knife across the inside of her elbow.

My hands clenched the wrist of her knife hand, and I squeezed and pulled as hard as I could while begging her to drop it.

I was stronger and finally won. Her arm had a bleeding cut about a half inch long, but she hadn't hit a big vein.

I threw the utility knife into the trash can, washed Marcia's cut and packed it with a wet paper towel, and then half-dragged her to the nurse's office. I left her there without giving the nurse an explanation; instead, I ran to my class and asked for a library pass. Bobby had a study hall that hour, and he always tried to spend it browsing through the stacks.

I found him and sat down at his table.

"Look at what I'm reading," he whispered before I had a chance to speak. "In ancient times they believed that the universe was constructed of crystal spheres with the earth at the center."

"Bobby, I—"

"And the movements of these spheres created sounds, just like a crystal goblet does. And all the spheres moving at the same time created an incredible chord, a harmony that controlled the universe—"

"Bobby, listen to me." I wanted to work up to it gradually but didn't know how. "I just found Marcia. She tried to kill herself with a razor blade."

He looked up from the book. "Why?" he said.

"Because she thinks you've dumped her. At least that's what she says."

"Oh," he said musingly. "Well, I suppose I have. It was too easy." He shook his head. "I was in love with her a few weeks ago. And then last night I stopped. She called me and I didn't care."

I spoke urgently. "You've got to go to her. Now. Tell her she's too good for you, tell her anything — but she's gone crazy and you've got to stop her before she really does it."

He looked back at his book and closed it slowly. Then he stood. "You're right," he said. "I don't know what I'll do when you move up to the university next year." He paused a moment and rubbed his eyes. "Where is she?"

I told him, and he left the library without asking for a hall pass. He wasn't stopped.

After school Marcia came up to me in a huff as I was leaving the building. She had a thick white bandage on her arm.

"I want you to know," she said coldly, "that I might have died because of you. There I was, just trimming my cuticles, and you run in as if you're insane. It'd a miracle I didn't bleed to death. And what did you do with my knife?"

I think I stood there gaping for several seconds before Marcia's short attention span shifted. "Joey!" she cried. "Oh, Joey, wait up!" And she

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ran out to where her fullback loitered in the parking lot.

I stared after her, and it was only when Bobby spoke that I realized he was standing next to me.

"Give me a ride?" he asked.

On the way home I tried to find out what had happened, but all he would — or could — say was that he had explained it to her.

His father worked late that night, so I talked Mom into setting an extra place for supper. And afterward, as we still always did, we went into the living room to the piano. Now, though, I sat on the couch while Bobby practiced.

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?" he said as he played.

"Wouldn't what be wonderful?"

"The music of the spheres. Music that could rule the whole world, the whole universe. Music that would make the stars and planets spin."

There was nothing I could say. So I just listened.

After the night of my birthday, I didn't see Bobby for nearly six months and heard from him only infrequently. Then, on a Saturday morning in February, a UPS man brought me a flat, square package.

It was a record album. The cover illustration was a blood red and fire yellow detail of a solar flare. Above the photograph, in small white letters, were the words "Robert Tallman: *Sunflower.*"

I looked at that tableau for a long time before turning over the album to see the back cover. The photo there was identical to the first, but superimposed over it was a list of the pieces included and the instrumentation Bobby had used for each.

At the bottom was something I almost missed.

"For Lynne," it said.

My hands were trembling slightly as I put the black vinyl disc on the turntable. I plugged in headphones to be sure I wouldn't bother the people downstairs.

The album began with the same piece he'd used to start off the set at the bar, and it was all I could do to force myself to listen to it all the way through. I kept seeing the faces of the audience as they surged with the angry sounds.

The other four cuts were things he hadn't played that night. They were all beautiful works, but my favorite was the one that took up the entire second side, the one called "Sunflower." It seemed to me that in most respects Bobby had achieved what he had wanted as a child; the music was alternately dusty and yellow like the flower itself, hot and flaring like the sun, and piognant like the smell I could still call up from my memory.

But for all my pleasure at listening to the complex, intriguing sounds Bobby had created, there was something about all the pieces, even "Sunflower," that troubled me. On an intellectual level I *knew* that the music was perfect.

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But emotionally I wanted something more. There was some sound, some chord, that a small, almost unconscious part of me kept straining to hear but that never came.

When I had finished listening, I took off the headphones and began to go about my usual Saturday morning housecleaning chores. One of the first things I did was pick up the cardboard carton the album had come in, and as I was putting it into the trash in the kitchen, a folded slip of white paper fell out.

It was a note from Bobby. He'd bought a house about fifteen miles out of town earlier and wanted me to come visit him now that his "remodeling" was finished — preferably that evening since he had to go on the road the next day.

I went. His new home was a small, white frame house on a two-lane blacktop. The cattle in the pasture across the road blew out their breath in small clouds and watched my car uninterestedly as I turned into the driveway.

Bobby met me at the door and grinned. That startled me, and I couldn't find my voice for a few moments. I had almost never seen him with a facial expression that could actually be called a grin.

"Supper's about ready," he said as I came in. "I wish your mother were up for a visit so I could pay her back for all the times I mooched over at your place."

He wasn't a great cook, but the steaks were high quality if a bit overdone. I ate ravenously and enjoyed the meal more than any other in years.

The house, at least what I could see of it from the dining room table, wasn't anything unusual. It was old but clean, and the carpet was plain. The walls were a pale blue that seemed too quiet a color for someone who created sounds like Bobby did.

When we'd finished eating, Bobby swept the dishes off the table and brought out the beer. For the next hour we drank and talked about what we'd been doing lately — and reminisced about when we were kids. I didn't have much news to tell; I was still working for Keller and Rhys and their interminable research project and doing little else.

Things had been happening for Bobby, though. Even more things than I'd imagined from the album. I didn't listen to the radio much, so I hadn't known that *Sunflower* was already getting more airplay than any other album in the nation, even though it wouldn't be in the record stores for another week. And Bobby was leaving the following afternoon for a twelve-week concert tour. No band and only a few roadies. It was his show. He was more successful than I could have dreamed.

Yet here he was sitting across the table from me, drinking a beer, still Bobby, still thin, still pale, still my little brother.

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"You want to see my studio?" he asked after we'd finished off a six-pack.

"Sure, sometime," I said, thinking that he was talking about some operation in New York or Los Angeles.

Smiling, he gestured for me to follow him and took me through the kitchen to a white door beside the refrigerator. He opened it, and I followed him down into the cellar.

We stepped through a second door at the bottom of the stairs. His fingers touched a switch, and I was in a different world from that of the plain blue walls above.

Brilliant white light flooded a chamber that looked as if it belonged in a starship. White acoustic baffles covered the walls and ceiling, and the gray floor felt like rubber. Black amplifiers and speakers towered in the corners and hung from the ceiling on silver chains.

The room was tiered like a tiny coliseum, and each tier had its own array of black and silver wires and equipment. At the center, in the pit, the keyboards of the piano, synthesizers, and computers ringed a small gray space where I knew Bobby would stand.

Part of one wall was a large pane of Plexiglass behind which I could see the outlines of big multitrack tape machines in a tiny booth.

"You go in there," Bobby said, pointing to it. "The door's just to the right of the window. It's a little hard to see." I must have looked uncertain, because he grinned again to reassure me. "It's the best place to listen. You can talk to me by pushing the button on the chair arm."

After a few seconds of fumbling, I found the door handle between two baffles and let myself into the cubicle. I closed the door behind me, settled into the single chair, and looked out at Bobby.

The bright white light from the studio had made it possible for me to see the chair, but the control console was a black field below the window. I wondered if Bobby could see my face in the dark booth. As he flipped switches and plugged in wires, small blue lights began to glow in front of me like hot stars.

"What would you like to hear?" he asked when he'd finished with the switches. His voice came from the wall and ceiling of the booth, and I felt as though I were in the center of an enormous amplifier.

My first impulse was to request "Sunflower," but I'd heard it twice that morning. So instead I asked him to play something new, something he had just composed or was still working on. I wanted to see what he would do to top what he'd already accomplished.

His right hand reached toward a metallic band atop one of the synthesizers but then drew back awkwardly. He started to mumble something about not having anything new, and I stopped him by thumbing the button on the chair.

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"You can't lie to me," I said. "You've never been able to. So tell me what that thing is."

He hesitated for another moment and then picked up the band. As he gingerly fitted it over his head, I saw that thin, silvery wires attached to it led to a black box interfaced with a microcomputer.

"The headband," Bobby said quietly while looking down, "contains electrodes to pick up my electroencephalic signals — alpha waves in particular. The computer interprets the currents and uses them as control signals for three of the synthesizers. But the program's not quite right yet. I haven't got the filtering perfected. And I haven't yet been able to control my alpha waves as well as I want to. I'm hoping to work out the bugs on the tour."

"Sounds like you're breaking new ground," I said, trying to be encouraging. "I want to hear it."

He adjusted the headband and looked toward me. I couldn't tell if he could actually see me or not. "In some ways," he said, "this isn't new at all. Performers were using electroencephalic currents as control signals for electronic instruments as early as 1965. But I'm hoping to take things a little further and use this to help me...."

His voice trailed off as he flipped more switches and adjusted dials and knobs. He didn't need to finish, though. I remembered what he'd said months earlier. It wasn't the music that he wanted to perfect. He wanted to use the music to perfect himself. To help him find his focus.

He began to play. His hands moved slowly and somberly over the keyboards, and I was surrounded with the sound of a storm building over a funeral. Then, as I watched him, his eyes closed, and his forehead tensed.

And a clear, high fluting pierced through the boiling black clouds, shoving them aside to make way for sunlight.

It was quite pretty. Yet there still seemed to be something absent....

The music rose and whirled and spun. The funeral became a wedding, and then a ravel, and then a white light exploded behind my eyes.

It couldn't have lasted more than a few milliseconds, because my brain didn't even have time to assign a name to the experience. But whatever had been missing was there in that instant. It struck me full force and tore the soul from my body.

It was wonderful..

And then it was gone, and I was on the floor. Bobby was trying to lift me up. I thought he might be crying.

"I'm O.K.," I tried to say, but I couldn't hear my voice.

It was several minutes before I regained any control over my body, but eventually I was able to help Bobby get me into the chair. He held my face in his hands and watched me anxiously.

"Bobby," I mumbled. "You look like you're feeling something."

"I tried to tell you," he whispered.

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"I knew the filters weren't under control yet. But I wanted to play for you, anyway. I wanted to. I'm sorry."

I flexed my fingers. Everything seemed to be working now. "What was it?" I said. My voice was strong again.

Bobby's facial expression began to relax back into its more characteristic blankness. "Filtering problem," he said simply. "It got too loud."

I was about to question him further but stopped myself. I didn't want to force him into an outright lie. "Loudness" in the usual sense had nothing to do with what I'd felt. My ears weren't hurting or buzzing. Nothing in the booth had vibrated or broken.

Maybe, to Bobby, "it" had indeed gotten too "loud." But that wasn't the right word for me.

I struggled to find the right word and couldn't do it. It had happened too quickly. But I knew it was what had been lacking in "Sunflower" and the others.

He'd turned on the lights in the booth, and I was able to see his eyes clearly. If I tried, I thought, I might be able to find my answer there.

He looked back at me without flinching. His face was smooth and blank, but his eyes were concerned. They didn't waver from mine.

I found no answer, not in his conscious solicitude. His music was on another level, something more basic, more important....

"Maybe I'd better play for you another time," Bobby said, half-smiling.

"Good idea," I said, standing. I was a little surprised to discover that my legs weren't shaky. "Your amplifiers pump a few more watts than I can handle."

He glanced away and nodded slightly.

"Got any more beer?" I asked after a few seconds of silence.

Bobby shut down his equipment, and we went back upstairs. It was only when we entered the kitchen that I recognized the smell of the studio by its absence: ozone. I remembered smelling it as a child after a thunderbolt had split a tree in our front yard.

After a few more hours I was a little too tired and drunk to drive home, so I spent the night on the couch in Bobby's living room.

I usually don't remember my dreams, but that night I had two that were especially vivid. In the first I had a lover whose face was always obscured by darkness, but I could see his head because of the silver band of light that encircled the featureless oval. It was as if his face were the sun and couldn't be looked upon, and so the moon eclipsed it, leaving only a silver corona.

In the second dream, a pale face with dark lips and eyebrows hovered over me like a vampire in an old movie. Then it came down and kissed me once on the forehead. When it drew away, I was outside my body and saw that the kiss had left a red mark like a wound. As I watched, a thick

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stem sprouted from the mark and grew into a flower with a dark center and golden spikes for petals.

I woke up then — at least, I thought I was awake. I shifted position on the couch, and as I did so I could just see Bobby's bedroom door closing in the darkness.

He left the next day, and I knew I wouldn't see him again for twelve weeks. The final concert of the tour was going to be in Kansas City in the big sports arena by the stockyards, and he gave me a ticket for the main floor and a backstage pass. By then, he said, he would have the "filtering" for his new instrumentation perfected.

So for three months I found myself waiting for the day when I would drive to Kansas City to hear him again. When I realized that I was living only for that day, I almost hated myself. I had turned my life into a cycle of seeing Bobby and waiting to see Bobby. It was stupid, really, I thought. I wasn't responsible for him and didn't have to think about him constantly. I had my own life, and my work was important.

I tried to concentrate on that and couldn't. I kept remembering things that had happened when we were kids, the night at the bar when I'd first heard his electronic music, and the nameless stab I'd felt in his studio. All that stayed with me, even when I was doing my job at the research center.

Especially then. Less than a week after Bobby left for the tour, Rhys pulled his scan from the file. I came in on Thursday morning and found her and Keller arguing over it.

Both of them specialized in the relationships between brain physiology and psychology, but their opinions on specifics differed wildly. Keller had done considerable research into what he called "extrasensory phenomena" and had an unshakable belief that telepathy not only existed but had a physiological basis. Rhys, however, thought that humans were lucky if they were able to break out of their own skulls enough to communicate verbally. As a result, I'd always felt more comfortable with her than with Keller. She seemed to have a firmer grasp of reality.

As I listened to them argue, though, I found myself being more sympathetic toward Keller.

"If this individual were dangerous, as you suggest," Keller was saying, stabbing a finger at the laminated hard copy of Bobby's scan, "he would not have been available for a reading. He would have been incarcerated long ago."

Rhys shook her head firmly. "I'm merely stating the obvious: his brain displays an abnormality of a type we haven't encountered before. So it's important that he be studied further to determine if he's harmful to himself or others. Especially in light of the EEG."

Keller snorted. "You're relying on your study of alpha wave patterns —

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what was it, fourteen years ago?"

I winced at that. Rhys would defend her research to the death.

Her back stiffened noticeably. "That study has been supported by others around the world. It's virtually a proven fact that criminals, as a group, display a high degree of slow alpha wave activity."

"Perhaps so," Keller said, raising his finger and waving it vigorously. "But are you certain that sculptors or policemen or musicians don't display the same trait? Have you checked?"

Rhys pressed her thin lips together for a moment before speaking again. "All I've suggested is that this person displays both an EEG and a PET scan that are abnormal enough to warrant further testing."

"You also said he might be dangerous. That's what I take exception to. Why, this might even be the natural telepath I've been looking for...."

"Always the same fantasy," Rhys muttered.

Keller was about to retort, but I coughed to announce my presence. They hadn't noticed me yet, although I'd been in the room for several minutes.

"Ah, there you are, Lynne," Rhys said. She picked up the scan and walked toward me. "Neither of us remembers taking this, and it's unusual enough that I think we'd recall it if we'd done it. I realize you've processed nearly twelve hundred subjects by now, but if you could examine this and perhaps...."

I knew whose scan it was before even seeing it.

So should I tell them or not? I wondered.

I pretended to study it carefully. "Interesting," I said. "But we've been telling our subjects that their scans are confidential."

"Of course. We're not considering revealing his name to the public. Do you remember the subject?"

Rhys and Keller were both experts, and, whatever their disagreements, they both saw something strange in Bobby's scan. If Keller was right, there'd be no harm in further testing, and it might even be worthwhile. And if Rhys was right, this would probably be my last chance to do anything about it. Bobby was going to be exposed to at least a million stomping, shouting people throughout the coming weeks, and anything might happen to him or to others if his brain went haywire.

Maybe it would be best if I told them. Maybe Bobby needed help.

Maybe....

"No," I said, and shrugged. "No, I'm sorry. There've been so many. And this was" — I pretended to squint at the date in the corner — "nearly a year ago."

Rhys nodded grimly, as if that was what she had expected, and took the scan back from me. I was, after all, only a graduate student, and not an exceptionally brilliant one at that. I could

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hardly be expected to remember one out of hundreds.

She and Keller argued for a few more hours, but then the subject dropped and wasn't brought up again. Neither of them had been all that concerned after all, I told myself. It was just an excuse to disagree with each other.

But I *had* noticed the strangeness of the scan when I'd taken it. I'd noticed because it was Bobby's.

And because it was Bobby's, I wouldn't tell anyone.

Maybe that was wrong. I didn't know.

And I didn't care.

From the outside, the arena looked like a huge, white, bloated creature. I couldn't shake the image, and it was reinforced when I had to breathe the dirty, smoky atmosphere inside and hear the deafening murmur of twenty thousand tightly packed human beings. It was a murmur of potential danger and power, and it was waiting for something — a signal. The mob was a single entity, and it wanted a thing that could not be named.

Whatever the thing was, it was embodied in Bobby. When the massive floodlights hanging from the distant ceiling blacked out and a single white spot of brilliance illuminated the figure on the stage, tiny amid the black angles of his equipment, the breath of the mob exploded in a roar of thanksgiving.

It began just as it had the previous August, and I had to leave my seat. I couldn't stand being in the midst of that rage, that barely restrained frenzy. The screams of excitement had changed to cries of anger and terror.

I began walking up the aisle, and then running. By the time I stopped I was near the roof of the arena, far away from the stage.

From that vantage point, Bobby seemed to be a miniature automaton surrounded by flesh, and I saw how his music controlled the living mass. It pulsed out in ripples, and the ripples spread through the thousands of bodies as if they were water.

The single white spotlight stayed on him, and he moved only slightly as he played. Silver flashed from his forehead. He was wearing the headband.

When the anger subsided and was transmuted into something else, I began to walk slowly back to my seat.

The people I saw as I walked were crying, laughing, and hugging each other. They sang along with the wordless music as if words didn't matter. Only the sounds mattered; only their raw voices had meaning. They made love without touching each other.

No: by touching in ways they had never touched before.

Sweating, drained, exhausted, I slumped into my seat and gazed up at Bobby. He was looking at me. He knew where I was.

He was playing the song he had tried to play for me at his house. It was a song of breaking through rage,

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through pain, through death, just as the sun broke through the clouds. Everyone around me felt it. Their joy consumed them. They had never known it before. They reached for Bobby and sang their love for him.

All around me, they were being transformed.

And I was untouched.

The music was beautiful. I knew that. But he was playing something else that I couldn't hear.

Everyone else heard it. I could see it in their bodies' movements, in their slick, happy faces.

And realizing that I was alone, that I couldn't feel what they felt, I forced myself to feel nothing. Even that was better than aching. For the first time, I was aware of the effort it took.

It went on for three hours. I sat there listening to the music while the others lived in it. Once I wanted to leap up and scream *Why? Why them and not me? Why?*

But I knew — I knew in my forever rational, forever reasonable mind — that the asking would hurt as much as the answer would. So I beat down the thing rising in my throat quietly while the people around me intertwined like threads or tongues.

When it was over, no one moved for the exits. They all stayed seated, reclined as if basking in a delicious afterglow.

I looked at the stage, and Bobby was gone. I hadn't even seen him leave.

There was no encore, and no one shouted for one. After several minutes people began to stand and mill around, talking to each other and laughing as if they were at a gigantic family reunion.

I stood, too, and I made my way toward the right side of the stage where I'd noticed barricades earlier. I had a backstage pass. I wanted to get to Bobby, grab him by the shoulders, and shake him until I knew what was wrong with me.

The burly black man at the barricade smiled and only glanced at my pass. I was about to walk through the opening he made for me when I felt a touch on my shoulder.

It was Peter. I hardly recognized him at first in the dim light, and when I did the first thing that came to mind was that he'd left just over a year ago. I hadn't seen him since.

When he spoke, his voice didn't sound like anyone I'd ever known. He was changed, elevated. He wasn't the Peter I'd lived with.

"I'm glad I found you," he told me, smiling. "Before you say anything, I've got to tell you I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the way I was. I know I don't deserve to be forgiven, but it's important to me that you know I'm ... sorry." His irises flickered strangely.

I must have said something, but I didn't know what it was.

Peter's eyes turned toward the unknown area beyond the barricade. "You see," he said. "I didn't know then. I didn't know why you kept seeing him. Now I do."

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Something in my chest churned. Peter knew something, yes; but it was nothing even remotely similar to anything that I'd ever known.

He continued to stare toward the backstage darkness. "I know how you must have felt then," he said. "How you must feel now." He looked down at me for a brief instant. "You're awfully lucky," he whispered.

Then he kissed me on the cheek and turned back into the crowd.

When I found Bobby, he wasn't surrounded by the throng of admirers, guards, and lovers I'd expected. He was alone, sitting on a black trunk.

He grinned. "I've been waiting for you," he said.

I could only look at him.

His grin melted away. "Lynne? Something wrong?"

Again, for an instant. I wanted to scream my question. And again I squelched it. If there was an an answer, I could find it myself. Quietly. Rationally. Without emotion. Without screaming.

Maybe I already knew it.

"No," I said, and I felt my facial muscles turn my mouth up into a smile.

"Good," Bobby said, grinning again. He got off the trunk and hugged me. "Well? Am I a success?"

"You're a success," I said.

He laughed. It was a clear, high note, almost like singing. I'd heard him play many times, but I'd never heard him use his voice to sing before.

He released me from the hug, and I saw sparks in his eyes.

"You've reached it, haven't you?" I said slowly.

He nodded.

"I suppose, then," I said, "you'll be leaving music for other things."

"Soon. Changes are coming."

I bit my lower lip and looked down at the floor. Streaks of gray dust scarred the dark surface.

"You going to bother me anymore?" I said, trying to joke.

"Always," he said. "Not too often from now on. But I'm an incurable moocher." He paused. I didn't look up to see if he had any expression. "Infrequently. Rarely, even. But you'll never be completely rid of me."

He opened the trunk then, and I was able to feel something when I saw he'd brought the beer.

The Music of the Spheres was delivered to me two weeks later. It consists of cuts that were recorded on the concert tour. I still haven't taken off the plastic.

Bobby dropped out of sight after the tour, and the critics and fans have been lamenting their loss for the last three months. Just two days ago I read a feature in the Sunday paper that speculated about what might have happened to him. In the course of her research, the reporter had found Bobby's father and interviewed him. But the only thing he could say was, "How

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the hell should I know?" They were never close, despite the fact that they were the whole family. Bobby's dad never understood the piano playing any more than my father did.

After reading the article, I drove out to Bobby's house on impulse. It's empty now, although I think he might still own it. I wonder if the studio's still in the cellar.

I've decided to stop working on my thesis, and I'm only doing my job at the center out of habit. It's not that I'm giving up; it's just that everything I've learned and everything that Rhys and Keller have been trying to learn won't mean much before long. I don't think so, anyway.

Everybody saw it: Today on national television, beamed by satellite to every country on earth, the president of the United States and the president of the Soviet Union began sobbing as they met for strategic arms negotiations. And then crying outright. And then they hugged like two bears and swore that they loved each other as brothers.

No one criticized them. Not Pravda, not the Pentagon, not Congress, not the local chapter of the John Birch Society. No one.

The news commentators cried, too.

I'm tired, but I can't sleep yet. The clear plastic on the album cover peels off in thin strips, like Christmas tinsel.

No, Dr. Keller. That scan wasn't your long-sought-after natural telepath. Telepaths deal only with thoughts, with our rational minds. They can't affect the lower level, the one of passion, of hatred, of love. They can't make us feel simply by feeling themselves.

He loves me. He loved me. Past, present, always. When he was six years old. When he dropped out of college.

In most ways, he's always loved everyone else, too. But he never had any reservations about making them feel it in return.

Me, though — me, he wouldn't force. He filtered me out, left me untouched.

Bobby, didn't you know I'd be glad for it, glad to know the name of what I felt in your studio?

The hum in my ears tells me that the volume is probably turned up too high, but that's all right. I want no distractions now.

None except the smell and feel of the flowering weed I found in my mailbox today. Happy Birthday.

The first crystalline notes blast into me like ecstasy, and I close my eyes, trying to fill in the missing chord.

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Here is a marvelously fiendish fantasy which poses the question: would a man kill his mistress to save his own life?

The Fall of Robin Arms

BY
CHARLES L. HARNESS

For God's sake, Mike! Why are you doing this?"

"Straight ahead, along the passageway, dear Robin, or I'll blow your brains out. What little you have."

"But *why?* This'll get you in trouble, Mike. And just when you have everything to live for. The Nobel for all that biology stuff ... beautiful wife ... an established career. ... Would you throw it all away?"

"Through that doorway, Robin. It's narrow, but I think you can squeeze your beautiful muscle-bound body through. Careful, there's a smallish ledge. Don't fall off. Not yet, anyway. Spoil all the fun. And now the door closes behind you."

Robin Arms blinked and squinted in the sudden semidark. He inched forward, then stopped suddenly. Through his shoes, his toes were telling him he had reached the edge of the little platform. Without turning, he tried to trace with his fingertips the damp rough-cut stones at his back. No door handle. No hinges. He couldn't even find where the door fitted into the wall. Damn good masonry. He'd give the mad doctor that. He groaned softly.

There was the voice again. The timbre had changed. "You hear me now through loudspeakers. So now let's take stock of the situation. Not much light in the well shaft just now; yet, I think you will find it sufficient. As you can see, Robin, you stand on a rather narrow platform, positioned about one-third down the well wall. Look around you!"

Robin Arms craned his head up gingerly, but could not see the well mouth. Probably closed over. He looked across the shaft. The light was terrible, but from what he could see the

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well stones were faced together neatly. They looked wet, slimy, and showed no handholds anywhere. He looked down. Something was there, down and across the shaft. A sizable bar ... a *handle*...? In fact, not far below his precarious perch. And now, as he peered down, lights came on, spotlighting the area around that handle. He peered and squinted, and he made out a smallish room built into the wall side. Things were coming into focus. In the room was a bed. There were no linens or coverlet on that bed: only a woman in a red gown strapped tight to the mattress. Her chest was bare. Her terrified face shone up into the gloom; the rolling eyes searched wildly.

"Stella!" he screamed, nearly losing his balance.

"Robin? Robin! Help me!"

His blood chilled. Could he see the lips move? Too far to see exactly. She couldn't move her head. It was taped to a board. But her eyes ... darting insanely. ... He couldn't look.

She was calling again. "Robin? What's going on?"

He managed a despairing gurgle. "I don't know. Mike has gone crazy. He threatened to shoot me. I don't know how to get out of this damned place!"

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"I have to tell you something. It's very important."

"Well?"

"There's some sort of sword or dagger, just over my chest. Do you see it?" The question was terror-tinged.

"I see ... something." His eyes narrowed. "Just the bottom ... the point. ..."

"What does it mean, Robin? What is he *doing* to us?"

"God, Stella. I don't know. Mike! Mike! Can you hear me? What is all this? What are you trying to do!"

The gentle, ironic voice swirled around him. "Think back, Robin. You and I and Stella. In the bar at the health club. A certain question came up: Would a man kill his mistress to save his own life? Remember, Robin?"

"No," lied Arms. Ah, so *that* was it. Mike Dichter's silly question. The three of them, jammed around that tiny table. Stella too close to him. Under the table, her hand stroking his gorgeous quadriceps. He wondered then just how much Mike suspected. Or knew. And suppose he knew everything, so what? Would Mike shoot him and feed him to one of those genetically engineered monsters? Don't be silly!

"Well, Robin," continued his tormentor, "perhaps you truly don't remember. No matter. It's a simple question, and we'll find the answer by a short and simple experiment. To start, you can believe the evidence of your eyes. There is indeed a dagger poised over the heart of my most excellent wife. It is bolted to a lever fulcrumed in the alcove wall, and the lever terminates in the handle you see just opposite and below you. That make it a lever of the second class, doesn't it,

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Robin? Yes, I think so."

What? What did he say? thought the prisoner. Lover of the second class? Is that what he is calling me? No, my ears are playing tricks. Something Freudian here? Lever, that's what he said. I've got to pay attention. Lever of the second class.

The implacable voice continued. "Interesting thing about a lever of the second class. Gives a fine mechanical advantage. The nutcracker, the old-fashioned can opener, the wheelbarrow, are good examples. But you won't find any second-class levers in the human body — not even in yours, Robin. Human musculature is all third-class. Makes for speed — which we needed when we were coming down out of the trees a few million years ago. But when you want a good *crunch*, give me a second-class every time. So, then. As I am sure you have surmised, if the lever handle is pulled down, the dagger plunges into dear Stella's heart."

Robin Arms listened to his own heart beating away at his eardrums. He swallowed hard, then called out, "Mike, you know damn well I'm not going to touch that handle. What's the point?"

"Of *course* you won't touch the handle, Robin. On the other hand, let's stop and consider all the possibilities. Let's say — just *supposing*, mind you, merely as a remote hypothetical case — let's say you *did* grab the handle. Well, then, it's a simple matter to hoist yourself up into the alcove, and in the rear of the room you would find a stairway leading up to the garden. Your car is waiting for you, hidden in the hemlock grove. The keys are in the ignition."

Cold dew was breaking out on Arms's face. "You madman! You know I'm not going to grab that handle."

"Not really likely, is it, Robin of the Robbing Arms. Knowing you'd kill Stella. And think of the blood spatters. All over you. Messy as hell."

He forced himself to speak slowly and carefully. "Mike, what's at the bottom of the well?"

"What do you think, Robin?"

"Will I drown? Is *that* how you're going to kill me?"

"Kill? Who said anything about killing you? Let's not be uncouth, Robin."

Delay. Stall. When this platform drops, it's all over. Keep him talking. "You've done some noteworthy genetic experiments, Mike."

"Mostly failures, I'm afraid."

That was so. Arms had seen them. Misshapen monsters. From animals. Reptiles. And (he shivered) ... people? One or two had looked oddly human. Grotesque faces. Voracious questing mouths. With teeth awry and plural tongues. The eyes ... the eyes had looked back at him from their tanks and cages, and he had shuddered. He watched a thing kill and eat a Saint Bernard dog. And they stank. God, the odors. ...

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So now he dampened his nostril with a wet forefinger, and he sniffed. Yes, definitely, that ghoulish stench. A combination of dead fish and rotten eggs. Faint, but there it was, floating up on some hideous, gloating convection current.

Wait! He listened. A noise. Something strange. A watery sliding? A scraping. From where? He mustn't lose control. Maybe it was all imaginary.

He peered down into the darkness, trying to make out the bottom of the shaft. Nothing. Nothing?

Something was waiting for him down there. How far down? A long drop. Then a splash. Then he would be pulled under. *Maybe* pulled under, depending on how much water. Would death be slow or fast? If only he could be sure it would be over with quickly. When you are being eaten, how long does it take to lose consciousness? He thought of things he had read about man-eating lions. And sharks. He called out in a dry rattle, half a sob. "Mike?"

"Yes, old fellow."

"We're all adults. Let's discuss this in a mature, civilized way."

"Of *course*, Robin. Go ahead."

"I'll get out of your life. I won't see Stella again."

"Why, I'm glad to hear it. I'd like that."

"So let me out, for God's sake. And we'll forget all about your little joke."

"You *are* out, Robin. Jump, grab the handle, and off you go. One day soon I'll see you in the bar again, and we'll have peanuts and scotch and a good laugh."

"You know damn well that'll kill Stella!"

"Be realistic, Robin. She has to die sometime. We all do. You ... and I ... and Stella ... all terminal cases. The question is when. And how."

"What's at the bottom of the shaft, Mike?"

"Well ... call it a little surprise."

"This little surprise — does Stella know what it is?"

"I don't really know. Why don't you ask her?"

Arms called down. "Stella!"

"Yes, Robin!"

"What's at the bottom?"

She wailed, "I don't know. What difference does it make? Robin? Robin?"

The trapped man ground his teeth, but did not answer.

His persecutor continued cheerfully. "Well, now that *that's* taken care of, let's consider some interesting biophysics. That handle, Robin, lies eight feet below your magnificent shoulders. How long would it take you to fall eight feet? We learned the formula in high school. Remember? $S = \frac{1}{2} \times GT^2$. Supply the values, and we find that $S = \frac{1}{2} \times 32 \times T^2$. Solve for T — time — and you see that the fall to the handle takes about .70 of a second. Loads of time, really. Your brain needs very little time to tell your overdeveloped arms to stretch out, and your iron-

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muscled fingers to flex, ready to grab the handle. The myelinated nerves of your superb shoulders, arms, and fingers are extraordinarily responsive. When the acetylcholine starts to flow, those nerves carry impulses from your brain at a velocity of one hundred meters a second. That's about .01 of a second to reach your fingertips. Give another couple of hundredths to get everything in position. That's still less than .05 of a second. You'll have .65 of a second to spare. Time to yawn and smell the daisies as you float down. And even if you think you don't want to grab the handle at the start, you have plenty of time to change your mind on the way down. And vice-versa, of course."

Robin Arms stifled a gagging noise in his throat.

The inexorable exposition continued. "Think of yourself as something special. *I* could never do it. My fingers would slip. My arms would be pulled out of their sockets. But *you*, Robin, *you* have the perfect body. You have the muscles. You could grab and hold on.

"Let's review the anatomy involved.. The muscles that form the fingers into hooks will have to absorb the main blow. These muscles are actually mostly in the forearm. They're anchored to the bones of the forearm — the humerus and the ulna, and they go down through the wrist to the phalangeal bones of the fingers. These muscles have beautiful Latin names, but I doubt you'd be interested."

Let him keep spouting, thought the trapped man. The longer the better.

"Those finger muscles are really marvelous," continued the jailer. "They're prime examples of third-class levers. They bestow speed, not strength. They permit lightning fingering on the piano, the violin, the typewriter. But in your situation, strength is important. And I'm sure, with all your body exercises, your fingers are *strong*, Robin. Let's hope so! Assuming your fingers are in the requisite physical condition and can seize the handle, we still have the question of the intermediate muscles, going right on back to the shoulders: the muscles of the forearm, then the biceps and triceps, then the deltoids. All these have to contract strongly, and they have to hold that contraction; otherwise, those brave arms are pulled from their sockets. The humerus parts company with the scapula. The arm nerves snap. The fingers go dead, and our gallant body — drops. Alas! So you can appreciate that our brave experimenter must possess an upper torso tuned up and ready to go to work, well before he leaves the little platform. That is, if he's going to try for the handle. Of course, if he decides to fall and keep falling, none of this is of any interest to him."

Time, time, thought Robin Arms. He called out, "Why are you doing this to Stella?"

"Doing *what* to Stella? Come,

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Robin, let's be reasonable. *I* haven't done anything to Stella. And neither have you. Yet. No harm need come to my dear wife, none at all. Surely you can see that?"

"Well, how about *me?*"

"You, Robin dear? Every hair on your head is still in place. Your fears and apprehensions are unreal. They are phantoms within your mind."

"What's at the bottom of the shaft, Mike?"

"I *told* you, Robin: a surprise."

"A *nice* surprise? Something — pleasant?" He noted the cunning in his voice, and he was bitter. Damn! Stella had to listen to all this.

"Pleasant? Well, now ... that depends. ..."

He could well believe it. Perhaps things were down there that would regard him as a pleasant midnight snack. "I'll be missed, you know. How will you explain all this to the police?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I don't really expect a problem."

No, though Robin Arms. No corpus delicti, no witnesses, no problems. The madman would have to kill Stella, too, of course. The horrors would dine well tonight.

He heard a sigh. The voice of doom was back. "You'll forgive me, dear Robin, if I allude to a rather delicate personal matter. When we're frightened, our adrenals release some really neat hormones that help us fight — or flee. One of these hormones is epinephrine, a marvelous amine. It raises our blood pressure, boosts our heartbeat, pours glucose into the bloodstream, makes blood clot faster if we're wounded, all sorts of pretties." The lecture tones paused, as though to let the student catch up in his note-taking.

"So what's the bloody sadistic point?" moaned Arms.

"Just this. When a lot of epinephrine is generated, some gets into the sweat glands, and produces a symptom known as bromidrosis, or fetid sweating. To descend to the vernacular, it's the stink of fear. Carnivores frequently rely on it to find their prey. Of course none of this applies to Robin the Fearless."

Arms exhaled slowly. His palms and armpits were suddenly damp, and his heart stepped up its fateful staccato. He lowered his chin and sniffed. Could he smell himself? Yes, a faint but definite odor seemed to be developing ... but—

He felt a vibration under his feet.

The platform was pulling back into the wall.

Somewhere in his head he knew terror, revulsion, and a great regret.

He noticed then that his knees were bending. This amazed him. Why are they doing that? he thought. Is my body going one way and my mind another? Am I about to grab that handle by a simple overriding reflex? But this is *my* body! I have worked hard on it. It is in perfect condition, and it will do whatever I say.

The platform continued to pull away under him.

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He thought of that sad character in Orwell's *1984*, the one the authorities brought under control by tying him down and exposing his face to the thing he dreaded most: nibbling rats. After a little screaming, he stopped loving the girl and he did anything they wanted. Well, he, Robin Arms, dreaded those horrible creatures the lunatic Dr. Dichter had created, but that was the end of it. Those ... *things* ... weren't going to control *him*. Nothing was going to make him kill the woman he loved. Exit Orwell.

The little platform had fully retracted.

He was beginning his fall.

It was, as Michael Dichter had predicted, a long time down. Plenty of time. Over .70 of a second. Got to take over the action, here. Do what I really want to do. Make the the right decision. But what *is* the right decision? Can I live with myself the rest of my life if I grab the handle? Not that I would grab it, of course.

I think I'm falling a little faster. Question of acceleration. Still a bit to go. How was I to know he felt that way about it? And why *me?* I'm not the only one. Stella played the field. I know why me. I have a terrific body. He was jealous. He's a mass of blubber.

Lights ... sudden lights everywhere. ...

Heroics ... self-sacrifice ... always a place for that kind of thing. However ... always ... for a reasonable man ... especially with a body like mine ... the bottom line is ...

He could see the wet rugged stones rushing past, and he could see the welcoming glints on the handle, flashing up to save his life.

He screamed, and he grabbed, and blinding coruscating spirals exploded inside his eyes.

And now everything was simultaneous, yet spread out. One event, one sensation at a time, in orderly comprehensible sequence, and yet all at once. There was a "thunk" — the sound of metal driving into wood. He knew the dagger had passed through her body and into the wooden slab beneath her. Something wet and warm splashed his face. His eyes closed by reflex. He hung there, his arms and shoulders throbbing with pain. The light flashes were slowly dying away inside his head, and his mind was beginning to work again. He opened his eyes carefully. He was slightly above bed level. He didn't want to look, but he had to. Well, there it was. The blade was buried in her chest, right up to the hilt. Has she screamed? Maybe once. Along with him. The Dagger Duet, by M. Dichter. But she probably hadn't felt much. He licked something sticky and saline away from his lips. Her blood.

And now that other thing, Michael's final delicate touch to the tableau. The toes of his shoes had touched something. At the terminus of his fall the elasticity of his body had

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brought him down an extra inch, and his toes had touched something. In the half-light he looked down.

At the cushioning sand. No monsters. No nothing. Just sand.

He was too numb to groan. A surprise, Michael had said. But just now he felt no surprise. The only thing he felt was a frustrating petulance. The very least Michael could have done was to put a few slithery beasties way down in the well. Damn you, Mike.

So, get on with it. He clambered up into the alcove and looked around briefly. An exact miniature replica of his own bedroom, even to the mirrors on the ceiling and the bar in the corner. His nose twitched. Her special perfume. And he noticed for the first time that the moody strains of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* were floating softly from the stereo next to the bar. Our song. The lever must have turned the damn thing on. Bad taste, Mike. Finally he looked over toward the bed. Should he pull down the eyelids? No. All this was Mike's idea. Let him do it. I bet he thinks I'll have one hell of a guilt trip. Not so, Mike. Not so. It's all over. With you and me. With you and her. With me and her. All the permutations. *Fini.* You said it yourself, we are all terminal cases. The only question is when, and how.

Now, how do you get out of this hellhole? Ah, there's the exit, that archway on the other side.

But look at *that:* a cage, over there in the corner.

At this moment he noted that certain things were in motion, and probably had been for some seconds. A white filament strung on pulleys across the ceiling was still vibrating. The lethal lever had pulled it down, and the cord had reached in a deadly garland across the ceiling to the cage door and had pulled the door up, and the eyeless thing had come out, and was swinging its great head from side to side, and snuffling, and searching out his fear.

Robin Arms was getting ready to scream when it sprang.

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Larry Tritten, who publishes humorous pieces in a variety of magazines, offers a new story about an extraterrestrial who encounters humor for the first time and who does not get the joke...

Exit Laughing

BY

LARRY TRITTEN

The night Provenza was to come, I asked for his assembly in a garbage can, knowing he would not get the joke. It shows how eager I was to see him. Five months had passed since my arrival, and I was at home, comfortable and not at all eager to, as they say, rock the boat.

That night I had a light supper — potato soup, croissants, pork chop, crab Louis, shortcake, sponge cake, angel cake, devil's food cake (no limbo cake, hah!), and then watched the old movie *Gung Ho* on television, this one a drama in which an island of Japanese men is raided by others. I saw the parallel between that and the possibility of our own raid, and it made me glum. I was having a good time here, was well-liked, and the customs and habits were fabulous. I had no, as they say, ax to grind.

At midnight, the witching hour, and appropriate, Provenza showed up. I heard a great racket in the alley, banging cans and exclamations, and looked out the window. Provenza had appeared in a can half full of bags of garbage, had tipped it over, and was now standing on the earth brushing coffee grounds off his sleeves and making bewildered sounds.

"Provenza!" I called from the window. "Here!"

"There you are!" he exclaimed, raising a fist and jogging it. He looked at the fallen can and burst bags. "What is this?" he called up to me.

"A joke," I said. "But never mind. Go around the side of this house, then into the entrance, then go up the indented walk to the third level, then turn leftward, go to the door with a smiling visage on it, two eyes and mouth, and strike the button thereby."

Provenza nodded. "Weird," I heard

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him mutter, "already this is weird."

While I waited for him to come up, I had a macaroon and a lemon, and watched a commercial. Sometimes the little commercial movies are more compelling than the ones they sustain. As I finished the lemon, I heard the bell chime, then turned the television off and went to the door.

"Provenza, come in," I said warmly, letting him in. "Here, sit on this hassock." He did so, smiling.

"Is the flesh a good fit?" I asked, giving one of his cheeks a tug. "Yes?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Feels dense, plasmatic," he said with a delicious shudder. I nodded, remembering how wonderous it had felt at first before learning to take the flesh for granted. Sensation was an opulent thing in the flesh, and more than a little seductive.

Provenza gave me the eye, so to speak, and said, "So, how are things going?"

"That's for me to guess and you to say," I answered accommodatingly. "But how about you? Do you like your suit? Your hair? Is it good?"

He wore, as I had prescribed, a lemon plaid sports jacket, island shirt with bananas and beaky birds, blue checked pants, and his hair was done in bowl-cut, like Moe Howard's — an especially nice touch, I prided myself.

"I feel good," he said, with satisfaction. He held up a hand and touched his soft face with it, luxuriously. "Oh, it's like warming in a diathermal flow, isn't it?"

"Your name is Provenza," I told him. "Italian, I think." I knew such niceties were lost at sea, so to say, on him, since he had been disked with just enough information to relate and had no benefit of weeks of learning.

"Provenza," he said, testing the word, so to speak. "So, who are the Italians?"

"A dark-haired and -skinned people with poetic but prescriptive religion," I told him, "and also famed for their movies" — here I indicated the television — "and sexual urges."

Provenza regarded the television. "What is it?" he asked.

"Here," I said, and turned the television on. A picture of a black woman in a silver dress appeared. She was singing a song named *Love for Sale* into a microphone.

"Oh!" Provenza gasped. "This is incredible. This is something odd." He approached the television and touched the screen, touching the woman's legs. "What is this?" he demanded, intrigued. "Are the little people inside it?"

I laughed at that, and Provenza looked startled. "What did you do, then?" he asked, more perplexed than ever. "What was that sound?"

"It was laughter, Provenza," I said. "A luxurious hemorrhage. And my most perfect discovery here. I am eager to get you laughing."

"I have a word *funny* in my vocabulary," Provenza said, "but it is

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one I can't quite understand. ..."

"I know," I said. "I want to take you to a laughter session. Before the night is up I'll have you, as they say, in stitches."

"I'm eager to leave this place," Provenza said "I'm eager to do some things. What have you planned?"

"We will go to the Holy City Zoo," I told him. "Let this be a surprise."

He nodded expectantly.

We went down to the garage, where I opened the door of the Audi for him. He was looking at everything, but there was little to see so far. A few minutes later, in the streets, he was overwhelmed. The colored lights, bright metals, and shining glass of so many shops so close together was indeed a visual, as they say, symphony.

I parked a block from the Zoo and got out, followed by Provenza, who indicated the parking meter. "What is it?" he wanted to know.

"A machine to rent the space," I told him, but could see it was too arcane for him. He stood staring at the meter for a while, then was distracted by a terrier a few yards away. "Weird," he muttered. "What is it?"

"A toy animal that digs in the earth, hence a terrier," I explained, but this was too abstruse, too. He had only the basics. Well, I would hope for the best. He was in for a treat, was my attitude.

Provenza followed me into the Zoo, a small dark bar, wooden decor, with a small stage at one end. A musician there was playing a guitar, which meant the comedians were yet to come. The place was beginning to fill up with young people, but there was still a good table in the back near the stage. As we went to it I noticed the many amused looks Provenza was getting, but he didn't notice, as he was watching the singer.

After a few minutes the singer apologized for his performance and vacated the stage for an m.c., who made the basic announcements. During this talk a waitress came to our table. She smiled widely at Provenza, who smiled back at her. I ordered a pitcher.

"What is this?" Provenza asked.

"Sweet liquid intoxicant made from grasses served in a container made of a blend of certain oxides," I smiled.

Provenza shook his head. "Well, this is all very fascinating, you can be sure." The waitress brought our pitcher, and Provenza watched as I poured two glasses full of beer. As I lifted mine, he imitated me, and took a drink. His tongue did a little dance, so to speak. "Akk!" he exclaimed, and shuddered.

"An acquired taste," I said.

A comedian was introduced and came onto the stage. He was Jackie someone or other and was dressed in a white coat with a wine-colored sweater and named pants.

"Hi," he said. He looked the crowd over, concentrating on women, but his gaze was finally drawn to Provenza. "I didn't know the mothership was in

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town," he said, which got a few scattered laughs. The irony of this cracked me up, as they say, but Provenza didn't understand any of it.

"Or is it a blind-tailor's convention?" Jackie said, and there was more laughter. But Provenza didn't laugh. It would take a little time, I knew, and then he would, because laughter is contagious.

Jackie put his hand in his pocket, looking at the audience thoughtfully. "You even have a hŏle in your pocket?" he asked. "I mean, isn't that a *paradox?*" He made a bewildered face. " 'Hey, I got a *hole* in my pocket ... which is *also* ... a *hole!*' " There was scattered laughter.

"Well, so much for physics," Jackie said. "I'd really like to talk about my girl. She's very strange, sort of spacy, but believe me she's been around. ..." He winked sexually. "She's been upside down, too, now and then. ..." There was laughter. "I met Yolanda in Hollywood, where they say a virgin is as rare as a swizzle stick at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. We met at an S & M health food restaurant on the Strip — a place called Pretty Poison. ..." I roared with laughter at that one, along with the others, although Provenza was concentrating on the audience, looking at the bar, the waitresses, and trying to figure it all out.

"Yolanda is a very sexually liberated chick," Jackie said. "She's been in a couple of porn films, and used to hang out at Plato's Retreat. Talk about sexy women, she calls herself a Pink Supremacist." I roared with laughter. That one killed me, as they say.

Provenza shrugged. "I don't get it."

"You don't copulate," I told him, "or you would. That's my other discovery. But it is not easy to arrange."

"Anyway," Jackie went on, "we met in Hollywood, under that great lilac sky the Chamber of Commerce has put up down there. ... We were both there to break into show business. Unfortunately, we both had the same agent — Irving "Swifty" Lazar's brother, Melvin "Molasses" Lazar. ..." There was laughter. "He booked me into a police line-up. Said, 'You've got to start somewhere.' ..." There was general laughter, and I noticed that Provenza was now smiling foolishly, as if to participate.

"I really miss L.A., though," Jackie said. "I like the kind of weather where you cast a shadow in the daytime. ... Anyway, I had the usual odd jobs while I was waiting for my break ... I helped repossess the water from the swimming pools of people who hadn't made their payments. ..." There was mild laughter. "... I punctuated alphabet soup. ..." There was mild laughter. "And I had a job dressing chickens in a poultry shop ... getting the pants on them is the hard part!" Everyone roared with laughter, and Provenza smiled with more intensity, striving to participate.

"I'm Jewish, in case you didn't know," Jackie said. "When I told my

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parents I wanted to go into show business my mother was really upset ... she'd always wanted me to be a loan shark. ..." There was lots of laughter. "But now she's adjusted, she wants me to have the first Star of David on Hollywood Boulevard." Provenza laughed a little with the rest of us, involuntarily.

"Yolanda is not Jewish," Jackie said. "She's a lapsed Catholic — that is, she doesn't believe in Original Sin. She says, 'I've tried it all!'" We all laughed. Provenza laughed loudly, his chest convulsed, imitating everyone else.

"I don't get it," he said, chuckling.

"Go with the flow, so to speak," I said.

"Say, what do you think of the Moral Majority?" Jackie asked the audience, rhetorically. "The Moral Majority ..." He considered the phrase thoughtfully. "They believe in broader horizons for narrower minds," he said. That one killed the people, as they say, and I was convulsed by it, disliking the cultists as I do.

"I can't get behind it, personally," Jackie went on. "I met a member of the Moral Majority who worked in a florist shop. I told him that flowers are the sexual organs of plants. The next day he quit his job and moved to the desert." There was much general laughter, and Provenza laughed along with the crowd, but without understanding.

"How do you feel?" I asked him.

"This is exhilarating," he confessed in confusion, wiping his eyes. "But it's ... very weird."

"You know," Jackie said, "sometimes I stay awake nights worrying ... like, I worry about what we'll use for toilet paper when all the trees are gone ... that's why I'm a conservationist!" There was much laughter among all of us.

"And I worry about the Japanese. Have you ever thought about how ironic it is to watch *The Sands of Iwo Jima* on a Sony television set?" I laughed heartily, remembering the movie *Gung Ho* and getting the point, as they say, in spades.

"You know, the Japanese have invaded Pearl Harbor again — with video games," Jackie said. "Today everybody's video-game crazy. And where do you think the kids are getting all those quarters? I mean, when *I* was a kid we were poor ... we were so poor that I had to put slugs in my penny loafers." There was much general laughter. I watched Provenza join in with bewilderment, trying to share the experience.

"The whole world is getting videoized," Jackie warned the audience. He began to sing a calypso song, "Vi-day-o! Day-ay-o! Video *come* an' me *wan' go home!*"

There was a commotion of laughter, and when it subsided Provenza said, "Let's go somewhere and talk."

We left the Zoo and walked up the street to a Winchell's. Passersby gave

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Provenza looks of hilarity, but he was too busy looking at everything to notice.

"What did you think of that?" I asked him regarding the comedian.

"Laughter, it's weird," he said, shaking his head. He gave me a sudden critical glance. "It's a drug, isn't it?"

My answer was a laugh, which made him become very remote.

In the doughnut shop we purchased coffee and jelly doughnuts and took seats. There were only two other customers, and the Chinese girl behind the counter smiled outrageously at Provenza as she gave us the food.

Provenza chewed his food with cautious interest. "Don't tell me what this is," he said. "I'm not very favorably impressed, I think."

"I would like to copulate with that Chinese girl," I said absentmindedly.

There was a long silence.

"I will be candid," Provenza said. "I have many negative feelings about everything so far —"

"But relax, Provenza!" I interjected. "Get, as they say, with it. Give yourself a chance."

He frowned at me. I could begin to imagine what his report would be like. Suddenly I was depressed. I had laughed so much lately that depression was an unfamiliar feeling, but it was not pleasant. I looked at my coffee and thought about the probability of my being sent home, being rebodied, sacked again in that loose corpus, no mouth to laugh with.

Provenza finished his doughnut, making an ugly face. "Well, I suppose we must go now," he said. "I want to try this copulation, though I don't look forward to it...."

We drove back to my apartment, saying very little. A coolness had developed between us. I showed Provenza his bed and while he made ready to retire I brewed a pot of coffee.

"More of that stuff?" Provenza objected, wrinkling his nose in disgust. I brought in a can of cherry cola for him. "Try this," I told him. "It's different. It'll, as they say, kill you."

Provenza took the can, sampled it, then smiled. "Say, this is good. What is it?"

"Beverage made of fruits and compound of cyanogen, with potassium cyanide," I said, laughing softly.

Later, when Johnny had finished his monologue, I put Provenza back in the garbage can, suitably wrapped, of course. Then I wondered if I should watch *Saturday Night Live* or *Love Play* with Groucho, a true dilemma.

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Tina Rath is a Londoner whose work has been published in England but not previously in the U.S. She writes that "some time ago I was travelling alone, overland to Australia, and went down with a high fever in Bali. One night the place I was eating in closed for no apparent reason, and I began to wonder what would happen if they all did..."

End of Season

BY
TINA RATH

He sat on the hot, bright terrace, staring out to sea. The waiter hovered over him, poising the silver coffeepot, murmuring that they also served the English breakfast, asking if he would have more toast, or perhaps a croissant. ...

Richard looked up at him irritably, wondering if he had nothing else to do. But it was only too clear he had not. Everyone else must have had breakfast early, for there were no other guests on the terrace, though he did wonder where they might have gone. There were very few sunbathers in sight on the white and glistening beach.

"Where is everyone?" he demanded.

The waiter poured him a third, unwanted cup of coffee. "It's the end of the season," he murmured, as if it were something he must apologize for.

The travel agent had said the same thing, balancing his pen between his fingers, as if reluctant to write the instructions that would send his client off at such a time. "It's the end of the season, sir," he had said, but he sounded reproving rather than apologetic, as if his client were making unnecessary trouble.

"But the hotel will still actually be open, won't it?"

"Well ... yes, but they'll be running down, dismissing staff, closing down some of the rooms. ..."

"But it will be open. I mean, I won't have to cook my own breakfast? Or sleep on the beach?"

"Oh, no, sir." Again he sounded put out; clearly there were some things you didn't joke about. "They do keep on some staff for the off-season, of course, but ... but ... most of our clients prefer not to go at the end of the season."

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"Do you sell many holidays?" Richard had asked, rudely, but the man only looked surprised.

"Most of our clients seem satisfied," he said. The suggestion, unvocalized but clear, hung between them. Richard could always take his custom elsewhere. He set his jaw aggressively.

"I prefer the end of the season," he said.

"Very well." With the air of one who has done his best to save a difficult customer from himself, the clerk began to note flight numbers.

Now, sitting on that bright and desolate terrace, Simon wondered what had made him so obstinate. It was not the petty opposition of a clerk in a travel agency. No. The phrase itself had appealed to him: "the end of the season — to every thing there is a season, and time for all things under heaven," and his season, his time, was at a dead end.

An end to Miranda, a nice, civilized end. He didn't have to be badgered for maintenance payments, and she let him see the children every month, she consulted him meticulously about their schooling, phoning him in the early evenings:

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but ..."

"Good heavens, it's no bother at all. ..."

"But I expect you're going out. ..."

"Yes, but not yet. I've plenty of time. ... What about you, do you manage to get out enough? Are you finding the girls a drag?"

"No, no, mother's always ready to sit for them. And they're so good. No trouble. ..."

The unfinished sentences would hang in the air between them. There was really nothing to say to each other.

It was even worse with the children: two clean and dainty little girls, their clean, dainty mother in miniature. They were always too much on their best behavior, never at ease with him. He was a stranger after all, and his own unease preceded by the same dialogue:

"Come along now, finish up your dinner. You've got to get your clean frocks on. Daddy's coming to take you out."

"Oh, Mummy, do we have to?"

"Yes, you do. Come along now."

So he tried to bribe them. He bought them sweets, but he had been away too long: their tastes had changed, and he could never remember what they liked. Expensive chocolates, packets of space dust — whatever it was went uneaten. He took them for elaborate treats, which bored them; paid for riding and ballet lessons, which they took as their due; and when they met they all became more and more nervous. A woman had stopped him in the street once, as he tried to jolly the bored and miserable children along to the next stage of their outing, demanding to know where he was taking the little

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girls. She had nearly called a policeman before a wretchedly embarrassed Kathy had managed to say:

"It's all right. He's our daddy."

Now even Miranda greeted him, when they met at friends' social gatherings (not parties; their party season had ended long ago), as if he were a pleasant stranger she might have met once before, and they made light conversation before passing on. ... Oh, the season of Miranda was certainly over and he was not wholly sorry.

He sipped his cooling coffee. Far, far away along the beach he could see a bright umbrella. At least one other tourist was braving the end of the season. He felt no impulse to make contact. And that was another reason, and a much stronger one than any whimsical liking for a phrase, for coming here at the end of the season. He didn't feel like making contact with anyone. The empty sands pleased him. He could stroll along the shore feeling like Crusoe, but a Crusoe who would flee from the sight of a footprint. Even the silent waiter, still hovering at his shoulder, annoyed him. He had a momentary wish to be totally isolated, to live in a space station, served by robots; and then, annoyed by his own unusual fancifulness, he pushed his chair away and stood up.

"The gentleman is going swimming?" the waiter asked.

"Possibly," Richard brushed him aside and went down into the still streets. It had never been a fishing village or a fortress town. It was only a holiday resort, built on a barren coast. There were high concrete hotels along the seafront, and behind them shops, cafés, and discotheques. Everything for the tourist. Richard walked aimlessly. He had moved only to get away from the waiter. There was nowhere he wanted to go.

The shops were full of souvenirs. He glanced idly at the crowded windows, thinking he should get something for the girls and get it over with. A pair of tawdry dolls caught his eye; they were absolutely alike, apart from the color of their skirts and shawls. This was important. His two dainty little daughters had inherited Miranda's hard acquisitive streak. They had been known to fight, scratching and tearing at each other's hair over some toy. After all, they were too near in age. That had been Miranda's idea.

"They'll be company for each other," she had said, and laid the basis for a life-long rivalry.

Well, he might as well get the dolls, take them back to the hotel, get a towel, and spend the morning on the beach. He pushed at the shop door but it would not open. Impatiently he looked at his watch: it was ten o'clock, not too early to open, surely, and much too soon for siesta. He knocked on the glass and shook the door, but it was certainly locked. There was no one visible inside, either. The dolls were assuming a ridiculous importance. It would have been easy enough

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to walk on and find similar dolls in another shop — easier still to give up the idea of dolls altogether for the time being — but he stayed there, foolishly in the broiling sun, shaking at the door like an idiot.

A voice called him back to a sense of his own stupidity, a passer-by, trying to explain in gentle, halting English that the shop was now closed. "It is the end of the season." He walked on brusquely, hardly thanking the man, sweat running down his face, feeling as foolish as he no doubt looked. The sun didn't seem to think it was the end of the season, anyway.

He might as well go to the beach. He turned back to the hotel, noticing for the first time how empty the streets were. Surely the natives didn't evacuate the place, too, when the season ended. What did happen? Did the weather make a sudden dramatic change? Mediterranean monsoon rains to make the place uninhabitable? A peculiarly vicious local version of the mistral? Or did some strange madness overtake the locals, making it dangerous to stay? Perhaps there were sinister rites connected with the harvest, or archaic sacrifices to the sea-gods for the fishing. He grinned to himself. If there were any such rites anywhere in the world, now they would be made into a tourist attraction: "Golden Bough Tours, offering a comprehensive tour of the cult sacrifices of the world. See the representative of the Corn God slain in the harvest field, and buy your souvenir, hand-crafted gold-look plastic sickles from our guide." And this resort, with no crops and no fishing fleet, would be the last place for them to linger.

The hotel was cool and very quiet. There was no one at the reception desk, but he had kept his key in his pocket while he ate breakfast. He went straight up to his room, changed, picked up a towel, and started off for the beach. The complete stillness was beginning to get on his nerves.

The beach was a long strip of white sand. They said it had been brought there by lorry, dumped onto a shingle base; it looked so flat and white that it might have been painted, and, but for the red umbrella, it was empty under the hot, pale sky. The sand crunched unpleasantly under his feet when he began to walk on it; it might really be artificial, he thought, it felt so coarse and heavy grained, like builder's sand. The sea beat on it with heavy, regular surges.

He spread out his towel and lay down, feeling curiously exposed on that white expanse. It was like sunbathing in a parking lot. But that was what he had come for, wasn't it? Sun, sand, sea, and perfect peace? He lay for a while trying to achieve some sort of peace. When his face began to burn he turned over, so that his shoulders were exposed to the glare, and when that grew uncomfortable he decided to try the sea, though it was not very inviting. He walked out cautiously into the waves.

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The water felt odd. He could not define it at first; and then, after he had been swimming for a while, he placed it. It felt dead. There was no exhilarating chill, no salty tang — just the thud, thud, thud of the mechanical waves; and the water felt strangely warm and deoxygenated, as if it had been standing around for a long time in a hot room.

He got out of the water and returned to his towel, the thick, gritty sand making a hard coat on his wet feet and legs, like a concrete skin. He sat down and surveyed the scene, occasionally chipping bits of sand off his shins. This was becoming ridiculous. The sea could not have gone off at the end of the season like all the other tourist facilities. He was imagining things, and he had better face facts. It had been a mistake to come here, end of season or not. What he really should have done was make a determined effort to get Miranda out of his system once and for all. He should have found another woman. But even as he told himself what he should have done, he knew it was out of the question. His season as husband and father, even as casual lover, was ended.

Well, there was no sense sitting there, getting burned. He stood up and wandered back to his hotel room, showered to get rid of the sand — which refused to wash down the plug, but lay gritty and unpleasant in the bottom of the shower — then lay down on his bed. The best thing to do would be to cut his losses and fly home, but he was reluctant to make the effort he would need to arrange things, explain things. ... He closed his eyes.

When he woke it was late afternoon. He had missed lunch but he did not much care. He was not hungry, not even especially thirsty, in spite of the heat, which seemed to have increased instead of lessened during the afternoon. He had a slight but unpleasant headache.

There seemed little point in lying there, and nothing to do if he got up, but nevertheless he did get up, and wandered out onto his balcony. It looked out over the beach, and he could see that there had been no new arrivals. Only the red umbrella marked the curve of sand, like the last outpost of civilization. He began to wonder who was lying under it. Surely a woman. Men were never such dedicated sunbathers.

Perhaps it would be worth wandering down to see what she was like. If she were young, or even not too old, if she were at all passable ... it would be worth it to kill this feeling of the end-of-all-things that seemed to have lodged itself in his skull. He didn't go in for pickups as a rule, but this was a holiday ... they could huddle together, two castaways on a cruel coast. He forgot his earlier picture of himself as a Crusoe who would flee from a footprint.

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He gathered up a towel, suntan oil, a paperback, and prepared to stroll casually back to the beach, casually making for the only inhabited spot in all that desert of sand. Well, at least he could still laugh at himself. That was supposed to be a good sign.

The would-be Crusoe, the man who wanted no contacts, strolled toward the red umbrella, rehearsing some snappy approaches:

"I say, are you English?" — but if she were, say German, she might not like that.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" — no, not if she were a dumb blonde. It might take hours of precious chatting time to persuade her that he wasn't actually looking for a doctor.

"Would you like to borrow my suntan oil?" — that might be best. It could lead to all sorts of things.

He reached the red umbrella, his opening line still undecided. Perhaps, it was better to leave these things to the inspiration of the moment.

But as it turned out he need not have bothered. There was no one at all lying under the umbrella. It had been left in the sand, as significant as a lifebelt tossing in an empty sea, suggesting that some one had been there once but now was gone forever. He spread his towel and lay down under it himself. There seemed nothing else to do.

Dinner would be a welcome break in his isolation, he decided. He must find some people in the dining room whatever time he chose to go in. Perhaps the best thing would be to lurk in the hall, waiting until some likely looking person went in, follow them, and strike up some conversation. Even if they turned out to be drug addicts, or vampires, or a boring couple from Penge, it would be better than this.

He hovered in the foyer. It was all very quiet, so quiet that he could hear the thud, thud, thud of the waves. Nothing else. ... His waiter came up, padding across the wide expanse of marble floor, looking anxious, and still apologetic.

"Would you like to have dinner, sir?"

Richard blurted out, much more loudly than he intended: "But where are the other guests?"

"There are no other guests," said the waiter softly. "It's the end of the season."

Richard stared round at the lit room, the set tables he could see beyond the dining room doors. ...

"You mean all this setup is for one person, just for me?"

"We shall be closing down soon, sir." The waiter did not seem to find the situation ludicrous. "But until we do, we try to give good service. However few the guests."

In a daze Richard walked into the dining room. He made his choice from an understandably small menu, and at his unsatisfactory meal, the waiter stayed beside his chair.

"What now?" Richard demanded when he finished. "Will they open the

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bar, just for me? Get the orchestra and the flamenco dancers in?"

"I regret, sir, it is not possible to supply entertainment tonight. But we will certainly open the bar."

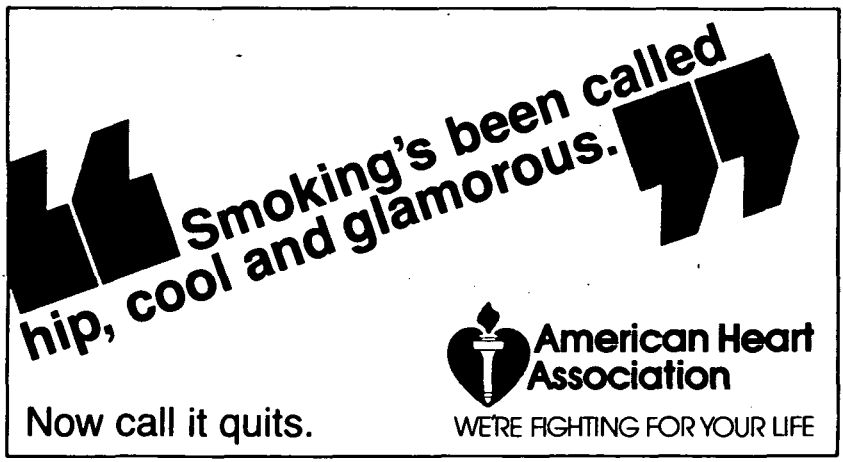
"No, that's not necessary. I'll go up to my room."

He felt that he should have been told about this. It was totally ridiculous, the whole hotel open for just one man. He had been made foolish and uncomfortable. The only thing to do seemed to be to have an early night, pack, and get away first thing in the morning. But first a hot bath to get rid of the itching soreness the sun and sand had given him.

The hot tap refused to run at all, and the cold belched out a mouthful of rusty water, and then refused to turn on or off completely, so it dripped annoyingly. He threw himself down on the bed, reflecting that he seemed to have spent most of his time lying down, but at the same time that he had never felt so irritable, so completely unrested. It was the silence. The utter silence of the empty hotel was getting on his nerves. There was no sound at all now but the intermittent dripping of the tap and the faint whisper that was his watch ticking on his wrist.

Utter silence ... WHERE WAS THE SEA?

Unbelieving, with only the faintest stirring of fear at first, he moved to the balcony. The beach was utterly still. The waves had stopped moving. Even as he watched, the stars began to blink out one by one, as the whole place closed down for the season.



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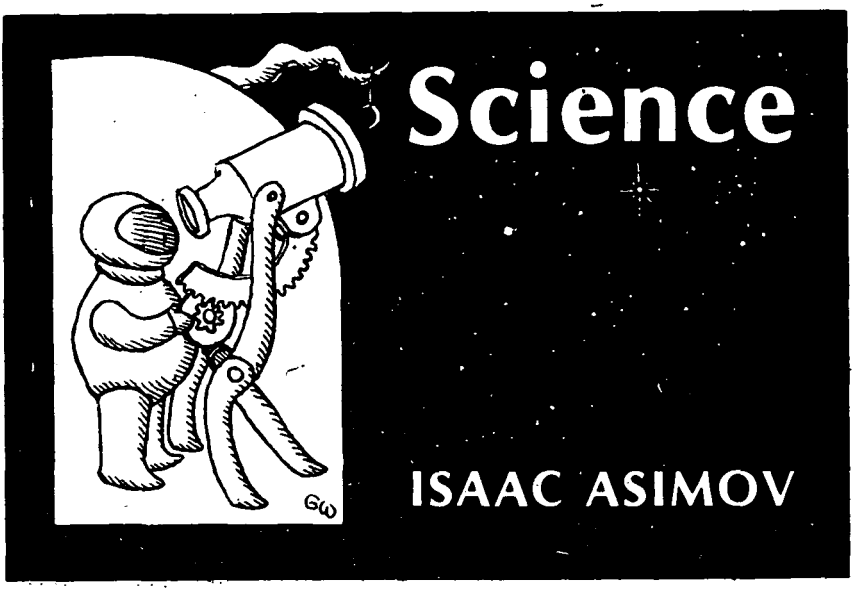

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

LOVE MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND!

One thought leads to another and I am accustomed to letting my mind wander. For instance, something I thought of recently made me wonder about the phrase "It's love that makes the world go round!"

Most people mean by that that love is so exalting an emotion that to experience it makes one feel that the whole world is new and wonderful, while to lose it makes the sun itself seem to lose its brightness and the world to cease its turning. —That sort of nonsense!

And who said it first?

I turned to my reference library and found, to my considerable astonishment, that the first use in English literature was in 1865, when the Ugly Duchess says in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* "And the moral of that is 'Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!' "

In the same year, it appeared (with one " 'tis love" extra) in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend.* Independent invention seems unlikely so that sentiment must have had an earlier existence as a folk-saying and, sure enough, there is a line from a French popular song of about 1700 to the effect that "C'est l'amour, l'amour, qui fait le monde a la ronde", which

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translates into the Duchess's remark.

Going back further, we come to the last line in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which contains the phrase "L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" ("Love that moves the sun and the other stars"). This refers to general motion rather than merely rotation about an axis, but it will do. And here, you see, we do not mean by "love" that sense of human romantic affection that most of us naturally think of when the word is used. Rather Dante is referring to that attribution of God which shows its concern for humanity and keeps the universe in operation for our good and our comfort.

This, in turn, may have been, at least in part, inspired by an old Latin proverb, dating, I suppose, from Roman times: "Amor mundum fecit" ("Love made the world.")

And from here we go back to the mystical cosmogonies of the Greeks. According to what we know of the doctrines embodied in the Orphic Mysteries, the Universe began when Night (i.e. Primeval Chaos) formed an egg, out of which hatched Eros ("Divine Love"), and it was this Divine Love that created the earth, sky, sun and moon, and set it all in motion.

Metaphysically, this "Divine Love", whether pagan or Judeo-Christian, may evidence itself in the material universe as an inexorable attraction that all objects would have for each other. There is indeed such an inexorable attraction that binds the universe together, and scientists now call it "the gravitational interaction."

What we may all really be saying, then, is "Oh, 'tis gravity, 'tis gravity, that makes the world go round," and that's not such a bad idea, perhaps.

And what started this line of thought? Well—

The May 1977 issue of F & SF contained my essay *Twinkle, Twinkle, Microwaves*, in which I recounted the story of the discovery of pulsars — tiny, rapidly-spinning neutron stars. These are no wider in diameter than the length of Manhattan island, and yet can contain as much mass as a full-sized star. The first pulsar to be discovered made one rotation about its axis in 1.3370209 seconds. That is a very fast rotation even for an object as small as a pulsar.

Why, then, should a pulsar spin so rapidly?

A pulsar is the remnant of a supernova; a giant star that exploded. Such an explosion would send part of the stellar mass into space in all directions, in a vast, expanding cloud of gas and dust, while the central portions would collapse into an extremely dense, extremely small neutron star (or, sometimes, into a black hole.)

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The original star would have a certain amount of angular momentum, the quantity of which would depend upon its rate of rotation and upon the average distance of the matter it contained from the axis of rotation.

It is one of the fundamental laws of nature that the angular momentum of a closed system cannot be changed. When a star explodes, some of the angular momentum would be carried off by the gas and dust that goes swirling outward, but a good part of it would be trapped in the collapsing central portions.

As the core of the star, with its angular momentum, collapses, the matter of which it is composed draws nearer to the axis of rotation, much nearer. From an average distance of millions of kilometres it shrinks to an average of only five kilometres. This would, taken by itself, reduce the angular momentum to nearly nothing, were it not for the existence of the other factor, the rate of rotation. In order for the angular momentum to remain conserved, as it must, the vast decrease in distance from the axis, must be balanced by a vast increase in the rate of rotation.

You see then what makes the pulsar go round as fast as it does. It is the collapse of the star, brought about by the inexorable pull of its own gravitation. And if we equate gravitation, mystically, with Love, we find that, indeed, "Love makes the world go round!" (Now you see my line of thought.)

If anything, in fact, pulsars don't spin quickly enough. The enormous contraction should result in a considerably faster spin. Soon after pulsars were discovered, however, it was pointed out that there were slowing effects. Pulsars spewed out energetic radiation and particles, and the energy thus expended came at the expense of their rotational energy. As a result, the rate of rotation should slow down. Another way of putting it was that the emissions were carrying off angular momentum.

Actual measurements did show that pulsars were steadily slowing. The rotation of the first pulsar discovered is slowing at a rate that will double its period in 16,000,000 years.

From this it follows that the older a pulsar is — the longer the time-lapse since the supernova explosion that formed it — the longer its period of rotation should be.

In October 1968, astronomers detected a pulsar in the Crab Nebula, a cloud of gas that formed when a supernova exploded 930 years ago. That's an extremely short time, astronomically speaking, so it was no surprise when the Crab Nebula pulsar was found to rotate considerably more

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rapidly than the other pulsars that had been detected. The Crab Nebula pulsar rotates on its axis in 0.033099 seconds, or 40.4 times as fast as the first-discovered pulsar does. Another way of putting it is that the Crab Nebula pulsar rotates on its axis 30.2 times a second.

By 1982, more than 300 pulsars were discovered and the Crab Nebula pulsar continued to hold the record.

This, too, was no surprise. Pulsars are very small objects and are not detectable at huge distances, so that the only ones that are found are located within our own Milky Way Galaxy. That means that the supernovas that formed them exploded within our own Milky Way Galaxy and should very likely have been visible to the unaided eye.

Only two known supernovas have exploded in our Galaxy since the Crab Nebula was formed, and those appeared in 1572 and 1604 respectively. The sites of those two supernovas have not revealed any pulsar, but then, not every supernova forms a pulsar, and not every pulsar that is formed spins in a direction that would cause its streams of particles and radiation to sweep across the Earth and be detectable.

With those two recent supernovas eliminated, we can be quite sure that we will not detect *any* pulsar that is younger, and therefore faster-spinning, than the Crab Nebula pulsar. Astronomers were so certain of this that none of them wished to waste their time going to all the trouble of trying to find an ultra-fast pulsar that surely did not exist.

As it happens, astronomers have prepared listings of all the radio sources detectable in the sky. Such sources do not have to be pulsars, they can be many things. They can be clouds of turbulent gas in our own Galaxy; they can be distant galaxies with catastrophic events taking place at their centers; they can be even more distant quasars.

In the 4th Cambridge Catalogue of Radio Emitters, there was one such source listed as 4C21.53. It had been sitting quietly on the list since the early 60's and no one thought anything about it. The most likely way of explaining its existence was to suppose it to be a distant galaxy, too far away to be made out visually, but sufficiently active to make its radio emissions detectable.

And then, in 1972, its radio image was observed to twinkle as it passed through the solar wind that sweeps outward from our Sun. That is, the image shifted its position very slightly in a rapid and erratic manner.

Twinkling, in a more ordinary sense, is familiar to us. Light, passing through our atmosphere, is refracted to a tiny degree, in unpredictable

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directions, as it moves through atmospheric regions at different temperatures. If the beam of light is fairly thick, small bits of it may shift in one direction, and other small bits in another. These may cancel out so that the entire beam seems steady.

Thus, a planet such as Mars may seem like a mere dot of light, even at nearest approach, but it is a fat enough dot so that different portions of it twinkle differently and the effect cancels out. Mars, on the whole, then, does not twinkle.

If we observe Mars through a telescope, however, we not only enlarge the entire image, but we enlarge the twinkles also. If we try to see the details of the surface, we find that the twinkling blurs those details. (That is why observing Mars from beyond the atmosphere would be such an improvement.)

The stars, however, are much tinier objects, in appearance, than the planets are. So thin is the beam of light from a star, particularly a dim star, that all of it can shift erratically as it passes through the atmosphere, and it twinkles. The twinkling, in itself, testifies to the smallness of the star's optical image.

In the same way, when 4C21.53 twinkled as it passed through the Solar wind, one had to deduce it was a very thin beam of radiation indeed. This was not surprising, if it were indeed a distant galaxy, but it is located in the constellation of Vulpecula ("Little Fox") fairly close to the Milky Way. This means that the beam of radio waves, if it originated from outside the Galaxy, would have to travel across the Galaxy's long diameter to reach our instruments. So much of the radio waves would be slightly scattered by the rarefied matter lying within our Galaxy (rarefied it might be, but it is much denser than the matter between galaxies) that no matter how thin the beam might have been to begin with it would have broadened to the point where it would not twinkle.

The mere fact of twinkling, therefore, showed that 4C21.53 was located *inside* our Galaxy, and that its radio beam travelled a relatively short distance to reach us and did not have time to broaden unduly, past the stage of being able to twinkle. And if it were that close and still had a beam fine enough to twinkle, 4C21.53 must be a very small object.

Then, in 1979, there was a report that if one studied the wavelength of the radio beam of 4C21.53, one found that it was very poor in the higher frequencies, poorer than were most radio sources. But pulsars were characteristically poor in the higher frequencies. Could 4C21.53 be a pulsar?

The question struck an American astronomer named Donald Backer

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and he began to consider the matter thoughtfully. If 4C21.53 was small enough to be a pulsar and if it had the wavelength distribution of a pulsar, and if it was therefore concluded that it was a pulsar, why didn't it pulsate?

As a pulsar rotates rapidly, it emits two streams of radio waves, one from one side of itself and one from the other side. As it rotates, first one stream, then the other, passes across some given observation point. If our instruments are at that point, the radio waves are detected in pulses, with the number of pulses per second dependent on the rotation period.

If the radio waves happen to miss us altogether, as they probably do in a large majority of the cases, we would detect nothing at all, but if we do detect the radio waves, we should detect the pulses also. If the pulsar were very far away, the scattering by interstellar matter could blur the pulses into a more or less steady, and weak, radio beam. If the pulsar were very old, the pulses might have weakened to indetectability. However, 4C21.53 is quite close enough (it is only 2000 parsecs away) for its pulses to be distinct, and the radio beam is strong enough for pulses to be easily detected if they were there.

It occurred to Backer that there was one reasonable explanation that would clear up the mystery. Suppose that 4C21.53 were spinning very rapidly, say at least three times as rapidly as the Crab Nebula pulsar. In that case, its pulses would go unnoticed, since the radio observations being made were not geared for pulses quite so rapid. He tried to publish his conjecture, but his paper was rejected as too speculative, with a suggestion that it was also too improbable.

Backer didn't give up. He tried to get astronomers at various facilities to attempt to spot ultra-rapid pulses, but over a period of three years, even when he could get people to try, they came up with nothing. One of the troubles (although Backer didn't know it at the time) was that 4C21.53 was actually a conglomerate of three separate, very closely-spaced radio sources, one of which was in actual fact a distant galaxy. This naturally confused matters when astronomers tried to take a very detailed look at it.

In September 1982, Backer asked the people at the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico to check 4C21.53 for a characteristic known as "polarization." Pulsars show very high levels of polarization, much more so than other radio sources do. The report came back that 4C21.53 showed a 30 percent polarization, which was high even for a pulsar.

This was good news indeed, for Backer was now more convinced than ever that he had a pulsar by the tail. The people at Arecibo had even gotten occasional glimpses of possible pulses.

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Backer himself went to Arecibo, where he made use of special sophisticated instruments for seven nights. By November 12, 1982, the matter was settled; 4C21.53 was found to be a pulsar and, eventually, it received the new name of PSR1937+214.

The new pulsar became quickly known as the Millisecond Pulsar, however, for it rotated on its axis in a little more than a thousandth of a second. To be exact, its rotation period is 0.001557806449023 seconds. This means that the pulsar is rotating on its axis 642 times per second. This is not just 3 times as fast as the Crab Nebula, as Backer had suspected might be the case, but 21.25 times as fast.

Suppose the Millisecond Pulsar is 20 kilometres in diameter. Its equatorial circumference is, then, about 62.8 kilometres. A spot on its equator would travel 642 times that distance, or 40,335 kilometres, in one second. It would be travelling at about 13.5 percent the speed of light.

A pulsar has an enormous surface gravity, but even that is barely sufficient to hold itself together against the acceleration involved in such an unheard-of rotation speed. If the Millisecond Pulsar were rotating but three times faster — roughly 2000 times a second — it would tear itself apart.

Now comes the question: what makes the Millisecond Pulsar go round so fast?

The reasonable answer is that it spins so quickly, because it is brand-new. When the Crab Nebula pulsar was detected and found to be rotating about its axis 30.2 times a second after a lifetime of 930 years, astronomers calculated backward and estimated that it might have been spinning 1000 times per second at the time of its formation.

Well, if the Millisecond Pulsar is spinning 642 times a second now, then it ought to have been formed a mere century ago or less; and if it were, that would account for everything.

But how could it be so young? If it were so young, there would have had to be a bright supernova, only 2000 parsecs away, in the constellation of Vulpecula, a century ago or less, to mark its birth, and would not that supernova have been detected?

No such supernova was detected.

Perhaps we can make up some tortured reason to explain why such a supernova wasn't detected but, putting that to one side, there's nothing to stop the astronomers from looking at the pulsar *now*, and, of course, they have looked.

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If there had been a supernova at the site of the Millisecond Pulsar in the very recent past, then there would be unmistakeable signs of that explosion *now*. The Crab Nebula supernova that took place in A.D. 1054 left behind an expanding cloud of dust and gas that is still clearly visible now. In fact, the Crab Nebula *is* that expanding cloud.

At the site of the Millisecond Pulsar, then, there should also be such an expanding cloud of dust and gas; one that is much smaller than the Crab Nebula in size, to be sure, since it would be so new, but that would be much more active.

There is no sign of anything of the sort, and that must mean that the supernova took place so long ago that the cloud it produced has long since dispersed to indetectability. That would make the Millisecond Pulsar quite old.

But now we're getting mixed signals. The ultrafast spin says "very young" and the absence of a nebula says "quite old." Which is it? How are we to decide?

One way is to determine the rate of slowing of the rotation speed. In the case of all the pulsars discovered prior to November 1982, the rule held that the faster the spin, the faster the rate of slowing.

The Millisecond Pulsar was therefore watched from day to day and from week to week, and the rate of rotation carefully measured over and over again.

Astronomers found themselves utterly astonished. The Millisecond Pulsar was slowing at the rate of 1.26×10^{-19} seconds per second. This was far smaller a slowing-effect than that of any other pulsar known, even though the rate of spin was far faster than that of any other pulsar known. The rate of slowing of the Crab Nebula pulsar is 3,000,000 times as great as that of the Millisecond Pulsar even though the former rotates at less than 5 percent the speed of the latter.

Why is this? The general feeling is that the slowing effect arises because of the energetic emission of particles and radiation by a pulsar against the resistence of its own enormously intense magnetic field. If the Millisecond Pulsar slows down scarcely at all, it must have a very weak magnetic field and that should be the sign of an old pulsar. What's more, measurements seem to indicate that the surface temperature of the Millisecond Pulsar is less than 1,500,000° K., which is very high by the standards of an ordinary star, but quite low in comparison to all the other pulsars — again a sign of great age.

All the tests but one, then — the lack of a nebula, the low temperature,

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the weak magnetic field, the very slow rate of slowing of spin — seem to indicate an old pulsar. In fact, from its slowing rate, astronomers guess that the Millisecond Pulsar may be 500 million years old (and perhaps older.) Ordinary pulsars last only 10 to 100 million years before slowing and weakening to the point where the pulses can't be detected. The Millisecond Pulsar is already much older than what was thought to be the maximum pulsar lifetime and considering its slow rate of energy-loss, it has the potentiality of living on for billions of additional years.

But why is that? Most of all, why should such an old pulsar spin as though it were newborn?

The best guess so far, is that the Millisecond Pulsar, having been formed long ago, and having slowed and weakened to indetectability (many millions of years before there was anyone on Earth to detect it), was somehow revved up comparatively recently.

Suppose, for instance, the pulsar was originally part of a binary system. (There are known cases of binary systems where one of the two stars is a pulsar; and even where *both* stars are pulsars.)

Some time after the pulsar had grown old and dim, the normal star which was its partner entered the red giant stage, and expanded. The outer regions of the new red giant overflowed into the gravitational influence of the pulsar and formed an "accretion disc" of matter that was in orbit about the pulsar.

The weaker the magnetic field of the pulsar, the closer the accretion disc would be to the pulsar, and the faster the material in orbit would move under the gravitational whip of the tiny star.

The material in the accretion disc at its inner edge, would spin about the pulsar faster than the aged, slow pulsar would be spinning about its own axis. The result would be that angular momentum would shift from the accretion disc to the pulsar. The pulsar would speed its spin and the accretion disc would slow down.

As the matter in the accretion disc slowed down, it would spiral inward toward the pulsar and speed up again, again tranferring angular momentum to the pulsar. The material would spiral down into the pulsar, while new material would be entering the outer edge of the accretion disc from the companion star. Eventually, a good part of the matter of the companion star would bleed onto the pulsar and the old pulsar would have increased its spin rate to the millisecond range. The companion would eventually be gone or would be too small in mass to maintain its nuclear fires, settling down as a black dwarf — a large planet, in fact.

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The slow addition of the matter of the companion star to the pulsar would not restore its youth. The pulsar would still lack a nebula; it would still be cool and have a weak magnetic field; and because it had a weak magnetic field, it would still have a very low rate of slowing of spin. But it would have a very fast spin, just as though it were young.

If this suggestion is correct, and some astronomers argue strongly against it, it should not be a very uncommon scenario. Binary systems are extremely common; more common than single stars like our Sun. That means that most supernovas should be part of binary systems, and the resulting pulsars should, more often than not, have a normal star as companion. And if a binary system includes a pulsar, then every once in a while the normal star should evolve in such a way as to immolate itself on the pulsar and speed it up. For that reason, a close search of the heavens should uncover other old, but speedy, pulsars, perhaps even dozens of them.

There remains an interesting matter.

The Millisecond Pulsar has a rotation period that is the most delicately measured time interval we know. The rotation period has been measured to the nearest quadrillionth of a second (fifteen decimal places!) and with time we might be able to do a bit better than that.

Other pulsars are good clocks, too, but they are subject to periodic sudden small changes in the rotation rate ("glitches") which may arise through internal changes in pulsar structure, or the arrival of a sizable chunk of outside matter. This introduces an unpredictable inaccuracy in the ordinary pulsar clock. For some reason, there seem to be no glitches in the Millisecond Pulsar.

To be sure, the Millisecond Pulsar's rate is not constant. It is slowing perceptibly. Every 9 1/4 days its rate of spin becomes 1 quadrillionth of a second longer. This isn't much really, since it would take 2.5 billion years for its spin to become a billionth of a second longer if this slowing remained constant. Such a slowing rate could easily be allowed for.

What's the use of such a clock?

Well, to take one example, the Millisecond Pulsar can be used to time the passage of the Earth about the Sun. The irregularities in that passage — the small drifts ahead and the small lags behind the theoretical position if Earth and Sun were alone in the Universe — could be measured more accurately than ever before.

These drifts would be due, in large part, to the perturbations induced

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on Earth by other planets. These perturbations, in their turn, would depend on the mass of these planets and on their changing positions with time.

Knowing the positions of the planets through direct observation, and with better precision than ever, thanks to the Millisecond Pulsar clock, we might well be able to calculate the mass of the various planets with a higher degree of accuracy than has been possible hitherto — especially that of the outermost planets, Uranus and Neptune.

And it is quite conceivable that applications even closer to home might arise, too.

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Michael Conner ("Below the Camel Barns," September 1983) returns with a fascinating and exotic fantasy about the death of a queen and the strange ritual of succession.

Five Mercies

BY
MIKE CONNER

I

The schell was golden-haired, beautiful, and blank-eyed and it told me in my father's voice that Mother was dying and that I must come to Queen's Island now to take her last breath.

I had seen the schell calmly ascend the stairs leading to my shaded grape-trellis. Now it stood before me, waiting to record my reply to the king.

How I envied that poor, insensible creature! Unlike me, the schell had been born without a traveling-soul to fill its mind, and existed only to serve. If I handed it my knife and ordered it to gut itself, the schell would carve its perfect abdomen open without hesitation — and without pain, for it would be doing what it had been created to do without rebelling against its nature.

And I, who had been chosen by fate to succeed my mother as queen, was less than this schell. I wanted desperately to rebel, but did not allow myself to do it.

The schell's eyes were flat and shimmering as the Crescent Sea at noon on a windless day. "Say to the king," I said, "that she will come. And that I wish we could be meeting under happier circumstances."

The schell repeated in beautiful approximation of my own voice: "I wish we could be meeting under happier circumstances." I shook my head. Not enough distance to reply.

"Change 'I' to 'the Princess Careev.' "

"The Princess Careev wish that we could be meeting under happier circumstances."

If I had not been under such strain, I might have laughed at the failure of my grammar. Instead, I snapped

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"Change 'wish that we' to 'wishes that you and she' — and don't bother to repeat it."

The schell nodded and started back down the stairs, heedless of the fierce afternoon heat.

"And tell him I want no part of being queen," I added softly, when it had gone.

As Princess Royal, there were naturally any number of swift vessels at my disposal. But I needed time to think, time to work out who I was, and what I was expected to become. I have always enjoyed mingling with the people of Almheraz whenever I could. What better time to do it than now, before I became their queen? Thus, I put on a plain sun-cloak, and slipped from the Citadel down to the crowded wharves of the city, where I attempted to board a steam barge that lay low in the water under a heavy load of passengers and cargo. The captain was a scar-faced man with a belly that would not have seemed out of proportion on a bull; he did not even look up from his manifest when I presented myself for passage.

"Booked up, lady," he growled. "Come back tomorrow."

"But I really must get to Queen's Island this evening."

"Queen's Island, is it? And just what the hell's business would you be having there?" I pulled back my hood a little then, and he looked at me for the first time. Then he blanched. Everyone in Almheraz knew that I would soon be queen.

"My lady! But we weren't informed! There's no cabin for you—"

"The deck will do."

"The deck! Sun's Eye, my lady, that ain't seemly. You there!" he called to some of his crew. "Clean out my cabin and get it ready for the Princess Royal!"

It took them only a few minutes to remove whatever contraband the captain had been storing in his quarters, and the barge got under way as soon as I was shown aboard. Three blasts of the whistle and a deck-rattling surge of power from the ancient steam turbines below the hold got us into the river; in a few minutes we had left the bluffs of Almheraz behind and were heading for the sea. The Eye had already set; all that was left was the Sun's shimmering, elliptical Veil, embracing all the delta in a soft violet haze.

On deck, some of the passengers removed their sun-cloaks and took advantage of the cool evening breezes. Wine-bags appeared, and I heard the rattle of dice, and smelled skewers of meat being grilled by vendors just below my cabin. Truth, I felt like a captive in a tower. It was torture not to be able to take in the river with my fellow travelers! The barge rocked gently in the crosscurrents, and the taste of the river on my tongue put me in mind of the time my brother, Danj, and I had run away from the Citadel for a day's fishing along the banks not far

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from here. Sitting in the shade, letting our lines drift, we had both been truly free for the first and last time in our lives.

Later that day, just before father's schells had dragged us from our refuge, Danj had used a stick to unearth a silt-burrower. Fortune-tellers in Almheraz keep them in glass-sided frames filled with mud, divining their clients' futures by interpreting the branching patterns of the tunnels the burrowers make. Usually they are the color of mud. Danj's was, when he pulled it by the tail from its home. Yet, when he put it into my hands it changed, turning the color of coffee, then ivory, and finally white as the cormorants screeched overhead, hoping for a handout. I looked at Danj in wonder: though he was a boy, he was still a few years older than I, and I trusted his wisdom in all things.

"What can this mean?"

He laughed. "How should I know? Maybe they change color to blend with their surroundings." Science had always appealed to Danj.

"It must be an omen."

"Yes," he answered gravely. I felt a chill, until I realized he was teasing me; then I dropped the burrower and made sure Danj got good and wet. We were wrestling in the mud that way, exchanging threats and bellowing mock-rage, when the schells found us. The king had been furious, of course. He could not touch me, but Danj he sent to his snowy estate in the northern Cordillera. I did not see my brother for a year after that, and when he did return, he had changed, his natural lightheartedness forever turned toward foppishness. We still loved each other, of course, but things have never been the same between us since.

I was thinking of these things, vaguely aware of the barge captain bellowing orders. He wanted some canvas hauled, to take advantage of the land breezes welling up behind us. The crew moved forward to unlash the sails. It was when they released the stays on the second mast that the commotion began.

People screamed. The light was bad, but I could make out a cloakless person who had dropped from inside the sails, and who now bucked around on hands and knees like a ram crazed by sheep's-bane. Howling and thrashing about, the poor lunatic scattered passengers and tackle and cargo alike — and yet no one tried to calm the stranger. Indeed, one crewman actually went over the starboard rail to avoid him.

Just then came an urgent tapping at my hatch. I opened it and found the captain wringing his cap, an expression of absolute horror on his face.

"A calamity, my lady. We've discovered a seer inside one of the sails! None of my men will go near it, idiots! Of course, I'd tackle it myself, but I'm just married, Princess, my wife's family'd gut me if they found out I touched a seer!"

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"What do you expect me to do about it?"

He flashed a ludicrous grin. "Beggin' your pardon, Lady, but you're Princess Royal, and certainly a virgin. It's said a virgin can calm a seer, and, well, you've seen what passengers we've got. There ain't a virgin here that I can see!"

"I suppose I should consider that a perverse compliment, Captain. Very well; do you have any beer?"

"Beer?"

"My virginity may well work the desired effect, Captain, but why take chances? Bring me beer — and one or two blankets. Hurry!"

When I went down to the deck, several of the pluckier young people had improvised torches from lengths of tarred rope, and had cornered the seer in the prow by swinging the flaming punks madly overhead. Bawling like a calf, the poor thing waved its arms in a vain attempt to hold off the flames, which it could obviously sense in spite of having no eyes to see them with or nose to smell the fumes. Bold now, the attackers began to make a sport of this torment, while the other passengers forgot their superstitious fright and cheered each flaming pass of the torches.

Their cruelty angered me. I shouldered my way through the crowd and grabbed a torch away from one of the attackers.

"Say, what you think you're doin'—"

"Shut up!" His belligerence cracked when he recognized me, and I held the torch before his eyes. "Or would you rather be blinded yourself?"

"N-no need to get huffed, m'lady. I'm puttin' my own hide at risk to save the rest of these good folks."

I spoke to the rest now. "Where is it written that you may torture a seer, so long as you don't touch it?"

"It's bein' punished for its sins is all, Lady," a voice in the crowd called back. There was a murmur of agreement; most people believe that seers are reborn physical-souls that have not been reunited with their former traveling-souls. In expiation for the offense committed in previous lives, seers are condemned to wander the world, senseless as schells, until they can steal — through touch — a traveling-soul belonging to a person. I had been taught this same thing; even now, filled with pity at the creature's predicament, I could not quite convince myself it was only a fable.

Still, something had to be done. I stepped closer. The seer lifted its narrow, bald head, its sucker-like lips parted, and out came a long and curiously structured tongue, one that ended in a yellow tuft such as insects have on their antennae. It groaned again — more softly — and extended its hands. They were hands that might have belonged to anyone.

"Throw those torches over the side. Now!"

The attackers obeyed me. It was

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the first time I had ever given orders to anyone other than a schell or a personal servant.

"Now, Captain, the bottle of beer." I uncorked it, and knelt down beside the creature. It trembled warily as I brought the bottle close to its face. I was in no position to move quickly when the seer suddenly grasped my arm.

There were horrified cries behind me, and I myself winced, half-expecting to be sucked away into the void. But nothing happened. Its touch was gentle, and dry, and warm; I felt lightheaded, but more than likely that was because of the circumstances. While some passengers made the sign to ward off the Sun's Eye, I put the bottle to the seer's lips and let it drink until the beer was gone and the seer sighed with unmistakable pleasure.

"All right, Captain, spread out those blankets."

It was done; the seer did not resist my leading it to the blankets, and I was able to make it lie down peacefully. A moment later, I had it swaddled like a babe, wrapped with a length or two of cord for the peace of mind of the passengers.

"They like to be wrapped," I said. "Now you can use the second blanket to carry it off. Just so there's no danger of anyone touching it."

The captain frowned. "That's all very well, Lady — and I thank you — but what am I to do with it?"

One look at him convinced me he'd have the seer thrown into the river the second his barge was out of sight of Queen's Island.

"I'll take it ashore with me, then," I said. "That is, unless one of you wants it."

The deck cleared as if by magic.

Two hours later we were deep in the capillaries of the delta, with the barge floating higher as the river grew brackish closer to the Crescent Sea. By the time the orange moon rose behind us, its glow was cast over the last of the river channel and onto open water.

Yet, there remained a head of dark land surrounded with a necklace of red lamps: Queen's Island. Chained to the island harbor like a golden medallion to the necklace was my father's barque. No man, not even King Cyre, was permitted to go ashore here, and so he was berthed, waiting for news that Gormayne's illness was mortal, and that death had stripped him of his kingship.

The barge captain wasted no time with signal flares or salutes, steaming straight in to the quay next to Father's. Crewmen nervously helped me ashore with the still-sleeping seer, and then the captain bid me farewell, always with an eye on the needle-prowed barque, as though he feared it were some species of sea monster that might rear suddenly and devour him. I gave him a gold crown for his trouble. Then the stacks belched fire, the screws

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churned, and I was left to my destiny.

The first to greet me — on boards and not solid ground — was my brother, Danj. He had grown tall and strong, but seemed weary now, and slumped as he walked toward me.

"I thought you'd never arrive," he said.

"The captain almost didn't let me aboard. But he made good time. Truth, I believe he was glad to get rid of me."

Danj didn't smile. "I don't envy you, little sister. Still, you're safe from Father, and that's something."

"Shhh!"

"Why must you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Defend him. Do you know this morning that he ordered Mother's physican killed? Oh, how he raved! It took me two hours to talk him out of it. Who knows what he'll do when he's no longer king."

"When Mother dies...."

"It's the same thing. I'm sure he'll have me burned so I can accompany her to Limbo."

"Oh, Danj, don't worry so!"

"I wouldn't be the first queen's son to burn."

I hated to see him so morose, and thought to reassure him that such practices had been abandoned hundreds of years ago, that too much was invested in his education, that he would always be of value to whomever ruled the kingdom. Before I could get very far, however, Danj noticed the blanket-wrapped bundle that had come ashore with me.

"Hello! What's this?" He moved the blanket a little, and whistled. "A seer?"

"It was trapped on the barge, and they were going to throw it off. It seems harmless enough. How could I let it die?"

"How could you? A wild seer, eh? You know, I haven't been this close to one since I was a boy. What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know. Have it released, I suppose, when there's time."

"Not much of that at the moment. Would you mind very much if I took charge of it?" Some of his usual good humor had returned. "I'll see that it's fed, at least."

"I was just about to ask you."

"See? We still think the same thoughts, you and I. Now you'd best go up to the palace. From what I've heard from the physician, our dear mother hasn't long to hold on to her soul. Run along; I'll see to the seer."

I started up the stairway out of the harbor, stopped, turned back.

"Danj?"

"Yes, little sister?"

"I'll protect you. As long as I'm queen, you'll be safe."

He blew me a kiss, and I mounted the stairs up over the rim and onto the path through the ringlike woods that surrounded the summer house. Queen's Island is a truncated volcanic cone. Lush foilage grows everywhere in the rich soil inside the ancient cal-

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dera, nourished by steaming sulfur springs around the perimeter. Farther in, the springs turn as cold as ice, for a great underground river flows south from the Cordillera and wells to the surface here in the delta. These cold groves are another world from the wild tropical copses that lie but a few yards away. Their trees are tall and lean, and grow slowly. When I was a child, and spent my summers here with my sister, Maud, I always perferred the cool places; yet tonight these aspen and birches seemed to be made of paper, with leaves of fine glass that would shatter in the slightest breeze. I shivered and hurried through, until I reached the moat that ringed the vent of the dead volcano. The summer house had been carved in spirals into that natural well, safe from the degenerative effects of the Sun's frightful Eye.

Red lamps marked the footbridge over the moat. It was nearly overgrown with reeds, the same reeds I had kept trimmed by weaving baskets and mats and sailboats from them during those long summers. Now I smelled incense, and rubbed my eyes as I entered the queen's house.

A ramp took me down and around to the public rooms on the upper level. A few of Gormayne's vestals stood along the outer wall like statues, holding out staffs topped with fans of green feathers. Water falling from spouts draining the moat splashed into the pool at the very bottom of the central well. I looked up, and saw clouds tinted with orange moonlight drift across the opening.

Then Mother's physician, and my sister, Maud, came up from below to greet me. The physician was tense, her face almost rigid with worry. Maud, on the other hand, was drunk.

"Am I too late?"

The physician shook her head. "The illness could have taken her this morning, Lady, but the desire that you be here overcame her condition. Her own will has done more for her than I. Try not to be shocked when you see her, Lady. The queen is very changed."

"I'm sure you've done all you could," I said, squeezing her hand.

"Of *course* she has." Maud's voice seemed to drift from the shadows like smoke as she padded over barefoot, silver goblet in her hand, her pale hair unpinned and tumbling down to her hips. With her broad face, full lips, and huge, emerald-colored eyes, Maud favored our mother more than Danj or I did. She was sensual, but able to calculate; emotional, but able to direct her feelings; cruel, but never without a purpose. Her appetite for power exceeded our father's.

I had not seen Maud since the Death of Adon ceremonies in Almheraz last spring. Then, she had disgusted me by sacrificing a live schell instead of the usual maize-wrapped effigy. Our last contact had been three weeks ago, when she had sent a gloating note reminding me that this year's harvest was the greatest on record.

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"Next year I shall burn Father," the note said, "and we'll all be rich forever!"

Now my sister came to me and kissed my full on the mouth, as she would a man.

"Pardon me, Sister," she said, drinking from her goblet. "But I have to wash the taste of queen from my mouth." And she spat on the floor.

How I wanted to slap her! Fearing violence, the physician quickly put herself between us.

"It's all right," I said. "The princess is obviously distraught."

"Distraught!" Maud laughed harshly. "Why should I be? You're the one that ought to be quaking. In fact, I'm surprised you've come at all."

"Why shouldn't I have come?" My voice was not as strong as I wanted it to be.

"Do I have to spell it out for a last-born child? Very well, *Princess*, I will. Gormayne's been ill at least a month. This idiot" — she swung her goblet toward the physician — "does nothing but brew chouris tea while Mother's life slips away. Now it's too late. When you go down to take her last breath, she'll have nothing left to give."

Maud flung her cup over the rail now, and the sound of it crashing against the stones at the bottom of the summer house made me flinch.

"This quack should have told us a month ago there wasn't any hope. And you, little sister, ought to have come here, and taken a pillow, and put it over Mother's face until she stopped moving. That's how it was done in the old days!"

"That's barbarism."

"Exactly! But I keep forgetting what a *merciful* person you are. You tell yourself that, don't you? Well, that's a pretty lie! Your 'mercys' faintheartedness and nothing more. It's merciful to no one, particularly not to you."

"Maud—"

"You accident! You go down there and take what's left of our family's life, for all the good it'll do. Go on! Go on!" Laughing madly, she turned and walked away, gathering the shadows until she disappeared, with the last echoes of her laughter fading into the depths of the well.

"My lady," the physician stammered, "I'm so sorry! She's been drunk most of the day. I slipped her a potion, hoping to put her to sleep before you arrived, but the mixture had the opposite effect."

"It's not your fault. Maud was my enemy the moment I was born. Now; let's go see the queen."

The physician led me down the ramp deeper and deeper into the house, past the kitchens, and the quarters for the vestals and the servants, past shrines where greasy candles illuminated smoke-darkened stone slabs, each drilled with a hold to represent the Sun's Eye. Deeper still, as the air grew colder and heavy with moisture, we passed the rooms Maud and I

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had used during the summer visits of our childhood. I remember Maud telling me once that the volcano was not really dead, and that it might erupt at any moment, How terrified I'd been to think of the weight of all those millions of tons of cold earth pressing down on me, and the white-hot magma welling even at that moment beneath the tiled floor!

At last we reached the bottom of the house. There was the prayer-pool, just as I remembered it, with its twelve water wheels kept turning by thin streams of water from the moat. Each wheel had a striker to sound a bronze bell on every turn; each sound of the bell was meant as a prayer to the Sun.

One of the wheels had stopped, Maud's goblet having struck its spindle and bent it. I put my fingers on a spoke, which was cast in the form of a snake, and gave the prayer wheel a spin. It turned two times before stopping, water spilling off the paddles and onto the floor.

Not a good omen at all.

"Lady?" The physician stood at Mother's door. "She's ready to see you."

Mother's favorite vestals eyed me impassively as I entered the queen's apartment, where the medicinal odors of the sickroom mingled with the overpowering pungency of boiled chouris leaves. That steam seemed to have energized the mural above the headboard, where stylized dolpins leaped in an endless parade of curled waves. The bed itself looked empty.

Then I came closer and saw my mother. In spite of the physician's warning, I was shocked. Gormayne's hair, once full and lustrous, was nothing more than a few strands of the color and texture of spider's webs. Her smooth, healthy skin had the appearance of old porcelain. She was only fifty years old, and before her illness she could have passed for my sister.

Of course, we were half-sisters. King Cyre had been married to Cleill, Gormayne's mother. When Cleill died, he married his daughter in order to keep his kingship.

Gormayne stirred. I came close, and thought I heard her speak.

"Mother?"

I leaned over her as I would have to when the time came for her to release her life into my mouth. I tasted her breath, but truth, felt none of the power of a queen in it. Instead, Gormayne seemed to be stealing my own life away; I felt dizzy, weak. Perhaps, if I could have paid for the fullness of her life with my own, I would have done so. But there was no helping her now. The exchange was not a politic one, and I drew back.

Her eyes opened when I did.

"Come ... here."

The physician brought a stool over to the bedside.

"Don't, Mother. Rest; there's no need for words."

With great effort, she smiled. "Are you ... ready to join me now?"

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"Sun's will," I said. My heart was pounding.

"My last child ... so weak. You'll ... see the end of our family."

"I'll do all I can to protect our family, Mother."

"No ... no ... Prophecy, when I was your age. They told me no ... redemption for the people ... no shriving for the sins of the Fall ... until the family passed away. Weakness ... required of you, Careev. Your reign short ... over the last of us."

"Do you truly believe that?"

"You ... do. You'd have come sooner otherwise."

"I didn't know what I should do!"

"You knew. You knew."

"I'll abdicate. I'll call Maud down now. Let her be queen. It's what she wants, and she'll save us if anyone can."

In answer, her hand closed around my wrist with terrible, trembling strength. Then, like a fishing line snapping, the strength vanished.

"Mother?" She was sinking into the bed, sighing with the passage of her traveling-soul. "Mother!"

There was no answer; only a gasp from the shadows behind me, and the physician moving forward in horror.

"My lady, you must take her gift!"

"I know." I closed my eyes and put my mouth against hers. The lips were dry and cold, and she did not seem to be breathing. Therefore, I drew the breath myself, and took what was left of her life, the force that had made her queen, and my own fate.

II

Father's schells were busy the rest of that night setting off fireworks above the harbor. Only when dawn came did the shrieking and the explosions cease; my ears were still ringing when one of the vestals brought word that the embalmer's launch had put into the cove.

"Have the body taken down to him, then," I said. "I'll seal her rooms myself."

Silver wire wound four times between doorknobs made a barrier against a traveling-soul intent on returning to the place where it had parted with its body. Gormayne's traveling-soul would be wandering the island until certain rituals were attended to. It was not unknown for a traveling-soul to possess enough will to reanimate its former body, and I did not wish to see Mother suffer the zombie's fate of immediate, unshriven burning.

When I finally came down the stone stairs to the quay, the sea breeze was tangy with salt and burned gunpowder. I found Maud and the embalmer waiting for me alongside his boat.

"Condolences, Lady," he said in a voice sweet and thick as honey. The embalmer was a skinny, owl-eyed man I'd seen before at funerals in Almheraz. Truth, he resembled one of his mummies, for his work had turned his hide tough enough to cover a chaise. Pres-

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ently, he was struggling to keep his attention on the business at hand, for Maud was cloakless, and dressed in the old style of mourning, with a fringed skirt and laced bodice that pushed her breasts tightly together.

"Are you ready, embalmer?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, of course. The preparations are complete now for the shriving, if you'd care to come aboard."

Maud bumped me as we came across the ramp. "Had your breakfast yet, Sister?"

The embalmer led us down into his spotless hold, where Gormayne's draped remains lay on a huge stone table that was ballast enough for five launches like this one. Channels to carry away fluids ran around the edges into drains, and there were casks and jars of substances necessary to the embalmer's trade held in bulkhead niches by leather straps. Just as we came in, one of the apprentices opened a fresh barrel of sparkling natron — carbonate pickling salts gathered along the sun-scorched tidelands south of the delta. There were also several racks of polished metal tools: blades, hooks, syringes, trouchees, forceps. These fascinated me, but the embalmer, in his element now, wouldn't tolerate my inspecting them.

"Stand there, Lady, if you please," he said, pressing Gormayne's flesh with his thumb. One of the assistants handed out cloth masks, and we tied them on.

Then, without warning me what he was about to do, the embalmer took a chisel and with one expert hammer blow broke open the small bones of the corpse's nose. The apprentices moved in with forceps; before I realized what was happening, their master inserted a long hook into the passage, twisted his arm, and removed mother's brain all in one piece, depositing it into a pan. Immediatedly it was washed, then plunged into a pot of eye-watering preservative. On the day of Gormayne's interment, it would be burned in expiation for sins of the mind.

How Maud's eyes shone! What could she possibly be thinking, watching her mother's brain being stirred in a pot like part of a casserole? Certainly not that one day this very thing would be done to her.

Suddenly I realized that the embalmer was glaring at me because I hadn't approved of his surgery. I had to force myself: "Very good, embalmer." Maud snorted beneath her mask. Meanwhile the embalmer ordered the shriver. In a few moments, one of the apprentices returned with a young schell dressed head to toe in yellow.

The embalmer gave it a curved knife from his tray. "Make the incision here," he said, drawing a line with his finger across Gormayne's belly to mark the place. The schell followed his instructions perfectly; when it was through, it stood there, silent and beautiful, as the embalmer took the

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knife and handed it to me.

I did nothing.

"Perhaps, Lady, you'd rather kill the schell on deck. For everyone to witness."

I looked at the schell. Its eyes were the eyes of a newborn babe.

"I'm not going to kill it."

"My lady, the sins of the body must be shriven, and this schell has taken those sins into itself. Your mother's physical-soul will never regenerate until you kill the one who opened her body and released the sins."

"In that case, here!" And I broke the knife over my knee.

"Lady Careev, that just isn't done!"

"It already has. Take care you preserve the life of that schell, embalmer." With that, I left the launch; Maud caught up with me on the quay.

"You little fool—"

I whirled. "Maybe I'm not the fool you think I am, Maud."

"A *merciful* fool, then."

"Killing that schell would have been cruel. But my sparing it had nothing to do with mercy."

Maud masked her surprise well, but it was there, and I went on: "You were right about Mother's last breath, Sister. There was precious little I could use in it."

"Denying her a proper shriving can't change that."

"I haven't denied her anything! When the schell cut ... cut into Mother's body, it took on her traveling-soul. Gormayne cannot pass into Limbo until that schell is killed."

"I had no idea you'd become so religious."

"I believe in our eternal souls! Maud, listen to me. Her physical-soul had nothing left to give. If I'm to be queen, I must have help. Perhaps Gormayne's traveling-soul, if it stays with the schell awhile, can find a way to help me."

"And why should it?"

"In return for release. I hold her traveling-soul for ransom, more or less, don't I? Maud! Mother said I was to preside over the end of our family's rule. Perhaps that's prophecy, and if the Fates will it, I cannot prevent our destruction. But I have the responsibility to avoid it! I'll make us go on, Maud — but I need your help!"

For a moment, I hoped I had gotten through to her. Then her eyes grew hard again and things were as they had always been with us.

"No one can help you," she said coldly, pushing me aside, and climbing the stairway over the rim of the caldera. She paused at the top to look down at me. Then she disappeared.

"It won't come, you know."

It was Danj, grinning at me from the end of the quay. "The skyhook, I mean. The one to snatch you away from all this."

"Oh, Danj, not now."

"Of course," he said, touching the side of his nose. "Now you truck with weighty matters quite beyond my male sensibilities."

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I sighed. "That's not what I meant. Look, have you seen Father yet today?"

"Father sent his regrets today, along with breakfast — a dish of small birds poached in a sauce of their own blood. They were exquisite. And, in another hour I shall be able to tell you whether they were poisoned or not!"

"Sent his regrets? But I must see him now."

"For you, little sister, I'm sure he'll appear. But, before such unpleasantness, I want you to meet someone."

"Not now, Danj."

"But I insist! A most impressive fellow, and, naturally, very anxious for an introduction to the Queen Apparent."

Like the rest of my family, Danj had a talent for leaving me with no choice. "All right," I said. "But you'll behave seriously, or I swear I'll have you whipped!"

"I do believe you would!"

Laughing, he led me to a pavilion that had been erected on the wharfside between his ship and Father's. He opened the flap, and I stood in stuffy darkness, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Eventually the stranger materialized: sitting impassively on an ivory stool, he was dressed magnificently in loose satin trousers and a cloak of brocaded purple. A cap of curly wool covered his head; his eyes lay hidden beneath glasses polished like golden mirrors. My first thought was that Danj had arranged for this courtesan to attend me. An angry thought.

"Well?" I demanded, "don't you have a tongue?"

It did have a tongue, one that was tufted with yellow cilia. My seer! Somehow, I think it recognized me, for it made a mewing sound and began to rock back and forth excitedly.

"Clothes really make the man, don't they, Sister?"

"This is astonishing! Did you dress him?"

"Myself? Sorry. It's easy to say you don't believe in certain things, but putting belief to the test is quite another matter. No, my schells did everything. And it was interesting, Careev, but they seemed to have a strong aversion to the thing. I practically had to stand over them and shout out orders. In fact, I got an impression that they'd tear it to pieces if I hadn't been there to stop them."

"Schells are not capable of violence on their own."

"Quite true. And yet, there's nothing so hated as a seer, is there? I believe they responded to that; at any rate, it's clean, it's been fed, and obviously it's happy to see — I'm sorry, to *sense* — you. I shall release it now into your incomparable care."

"Can't you keep it on your boat?"

"I really believe the schells would kill it. And I would watch it for you myself, but I'm returning to Almheraz shortly to see about preparations for Mother's interment."

"What am I going to do with it!"

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Danj shrugged ironically. "You're the queen, now, m'dear. Order someone you particularly dislike to hold it. Or perhaps it will remain here if you ask it nicely. Anyway, I'm off!"

"Danj!" I yelled, but he was already aboard his boat. Behind me, the seer stood up. In doing so, it knocked its glasses askew and rocked from foot to foot, cooing softly. A funny scene, really. I would have laughed if I had not been so upset. My seer smacked its lips. Firmly, I grasped its hands and made it touch its ivory bench.

"Your place. Your special house. Must stay in it." I was shouting. "Do you understand?"

The seer nodded excitedly.

"You stay here until I come back. Here, come back."

It nodded again, and stood perfectly still as I went outside again. However, a moment later, I heard steps. When I turned, the seer was right behind me.

"Go back!"

I took a step. It took a step. I took two more, and it did the same. If I could construct an approximation of human emotion from its face, I would have to describe my seer as determined.

"Very well. Come along. But at least your glasses should be straight!" I straightened them. Then we boarded King Cyre's ship together.

The barque had been stripped of most of its gold pennants and sunburst sails; all that remained was the red-bar ensign of the Panault family. Father's retainers had been similarly stripped of their old finery, and bowed suspiciously as we passed. One schell who stood among them tensed visibly when my seer walked close. I thought I heard an exchange of low growls.

Within Father's receiving room in the fantail, the Sun-crested king's throne had been replaced by a plain chair of new wood. All the allegorical tapestries depicting the union of the Sun with our world through the divine Adon were gone. Without these and other trappings of kingly authority, the barque was in truth a shabby vessel, her paint peeling in spots, tears of rust spreading red taluses from her rivets. I sat down in the wooden chair. Eventually the lizard-faced Eccles, Sun-priest and Father's closest adviser, came up from the hold.

"My lady, we were not informed."

"I seem to be hearing that every time I board a boat these days." We exchanged smiles. Eccles was Maud's husband, but in our limited dealings he had alway treated me with respect.

"It is your right, of course, to come whenever you wish."

"Thank you. There's a matter of some importance I'd like to discuss with Father. May I see him?"

"Alone?" He glanced at my seer, who had been still.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce you. A friend of mine from the river. My friend, meet Eccles." Eccles came forward to shake hands. As he did, its

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tongue darted out, and Eccles jumped back as though he had grasped a hot iron.

"A seer," he said, staring at his palm with fascination before wiping it gently on the front of his shirt. "You've done well to train it."

"Yes." I felt a little ashamed. It was Maud, after all, whom I wanted to hurt. "Now, what about Father?"

"He's resting at the moment, Lady. Your mother's death was a terrible blow. A difficult thing to lose one's wife; to be secure one moment, attached to a center that nourishes, brings warmth, life, then suddenly cut free. Adrift, lost...." His voice trailed. "Perhaps it's not possible for a woman to understand these things."

"Perhaps no woman needs to. What I have to say also concerns you, priest; if you want to listen, you can relay my intentions to him when he's refreshed."

Eccles bowed. "Of course." He seated himself on the bare deck.

"I wish to name Father regent for the period of mourning. He's obviously equipped to govern, as I am not, and I intend to make the transition as painless as possible for the people and for our family."

Eccles's narrow face betrayed no surprise. "Those are altruistic reasons, Lady. The sentiment, however, is generous to your father."

"My generosity has conditions. Father will continue to enjoy all the honor and authority due a king. In return, he will pledge to do two things."

"Those are?" Eccles took out a pen and jotted something down on a pad.

"First, he must renounce his family. It's really only a formality, since he's the only living Panault, no surviving females. If he agrees, I shall formally adopt him into the Gormaynes."

Eccles said nothing, merely looked up. The seer made a soft buzzing sound and shifted on its feet.

"The second condition is that the king will sign an instrument to the following effect: that should anything happen to me during the period of mourning, he shall suffer the same fate. His eye for mine, his life for my life."

"There are accidents, Lady, and illness."

"Yes. And their circumstance and effect will be duplicated as closely as possible."

A raised eyebrow, a closed notepad, Eccles putting his fingertips together. "I shall inform him."

"And advise against such an agreement?"

"There's little I can advise him about presently, Lady."

"Yes, and—?"

"I think you are wrong to worry about your life. It can be like a beautiful flower, Lady. Held too tightly, it is crushed into nothing." He stood and bowed. "However, I shall have an instrument prepared immediately. Will you still receive him?"

"I'd like to, yes."

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"A moment longer, then." He went away; meanwhile, my seer bent a little and put its hand against the side of my face. I was lost in thought at that moment and didn't notice until, suddenly, I was transported to another time and place. My traveling-soul returned to my childhood self, hiding beneath a table because I had broken a favorite crossbow of the king's. He was so large, his voice thunderous and harsh; his eyes, when he was angry, glowed sullenly as chunks of hard coal. I was so frightened, I thought my heart might burst; and then he came into the room, passed close to the table. I saw his powerful legs, his sandaled feet. He would crush me....

My seer moaned, and quickly drew its hands away. I returned to myself, and was wiping tears from my eyes when the Sun-priest reappeared.

"Your father begs your pardon, but he cannot see you now."

"Cannot? Or will not."

Eccles, to his credit, kept silent, and I got up from Father's chair. "Very well. Send word, please, the moment he feels he can speak to me."

"Of course."

"And mind he doesn't take too long!"

I was full of myself as I left the quayside and lightly took the steps up over the rim. By rights I should have been fearful, exhausted; truth, I felt as though I had defeated all the fates. Cyre of Panault had been afraid to see me! Surely that meant Power. Surely that meant, in spite of what Maud and Mother had told me, that I was queen.

Power brought changes. I paused next to one of the sulfur pools, where mineral deposits had made lumpy yellow columns, some broken off, in the deep shade of huge tree-grasses. The air was steamy, the smell was bad; and yet, I now realized there was an attraction to the quicker pace of life here. The jungle choked only what could not survive.

Insects had gathered in a humming cloud above the pool. Fascinated by their motion, I stepped close, extended my hand toward the swarm. I did not notice in time the seer rushing at me. We collided, and fell into the stinking mud, tangled arm and leg.

"Idiot!" I screamed, kicking it away. I stormed to my feet and took the path toward the moat, trying — but failing — not to hear the disgusting noises the creature was making. I stopped, and it stopped, craning its neck in a confused manner. Perhaps there was too much to sense in this grove. I decided to take advantage of that, picking up a hard seed husk and throwing it far down the path, away from the summer house.

The stupid creature grunted excitedly and crashed off after the sound. Clearly, I could not afford to waste any more time with this exasperating seer. I resolved that if Danj was absolutely against taking it in, I'd have it

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put painlessly to sleep.

I was feeling hungry. I skirted a cold spring, stopping to pick a few crab apples. There came a rustling noise from the brush on my left. I remember thinking that the seer couldn't possibly have circled back so quickly.

Then a circle of fire tightened around my throat.

Yanked down and backward as I clawed at the pain and felt steel wire, I became detached from my plight. My vision constricted to a tiny point of light that was all the doorway my physical-soul needed to escape through. The garrote tightened; I thought, *Is it this easy to die?* — the words becoming transparent as high summer clouds while my body grew slack and my hands fell away from my neck.

Sounds brought me back: shrieks of fury, and the rattling wings of birds startled into flight by the noise. I opened my eyes and saw my seer struggling with someone else. Each had hands around the other's neck. Then the seer seemed to dig in with its fingers, and its opponent stiffened, and finally sighed. Color and strength emptied, and the seer was all that kept my assassin standing.

Then I realized that the assassin was not a man, but a schell. The same young, blue-eyed schell that I had declined to kill aboard the embalmer's launch. The schell that had been holding Gormayne's traveling-soul like a treasure for me.

I tried to stand. "What in Sun's name have you done!" I croaked. The seer chirped back, and let the dead schell drop to the ground. My insurance, my strength, my queenship — everything that the schell had been keeping for me, had died with it.

Gormayne had been shriven, and I truly would be the last of my family to rule. How I wanted to kill my seer!

Instead, I fainted into its arms.

III

Bells.

Tiny bells, struck softly in sequence on an ascending twelve-tone scale. Never completed because the final note was missing. Ten, eleven ... one, two. That note was the prayer that belonged to me.

Chouris leaves. I remember smelling and breathing it. Once I saw a vestal bringing in a spouted brazier fired by charcoal that discharged chouris steam in a cloud that settled onto the drapes over my bed. Sometimes faces appeared in the clouds, but the clouds always rolled angrily and covered the faces up. I saw my mother's face, as it had been before her illness. She looked so sad, and I tried to tell her that I was only resting, but it seemed my voice no longer worked. Injury to the throat, I reasoned, always a mere minute or two before a vestal would return with a fresh brazier of chouris.

Once, I got out of bed. Thirst

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drove me out, and I saw a pitcher and basin on a table close to the bed. The floor I stood on had a door in the middle of it. This door opened when I reached the table; suddenly lava that was the color and consistency of currant jelly flowed into my room. It pushed the table away. It burned my legs, just as I felt myself falling into it.

More bells. Then, instead of the vestals, Maud came, three of her, bobbing lazily in the clouds. Her faces smiled at me. I think she took my hand.

"She's not looking well, is she?"

Another voice — the physician's, I think. "The wire was poisoned, Lady. So far, all our purgatives have failed."

"A pity." Three faces close to mine. "Can you hear me, Careev? Ready yet to breathe me what's left of the Power?" Laughter, drifting through the clouds. "She was never clever or strong enough."

More chouris. Spasms shrank me into the void, far from the fierce and lifegiving Eye of the Sun.

Bells were the only sound. Then I opened my eyes and saw that something had parted the clouds, a flower with a red stem and tufted yellow stamens. Fleshy leaves cradled my head. I felt a shock; I rushed forward, out of my body.

Daughter.

You're dead, gone—

No. I'm here. You were right not to accept the fate. Continue fighting, daughter, if you have the will.

So tired—

Not that way. Strength comes through another's hands. Open yourself, Daughter, and let the strength flow through you.

All I have left—

Give it!

And in the end, not having the strength to hold on, I let go. I was swept away, faster and faster toward a light that was as green as the well at the bottom of the summer house. Then I burst through the light.

I heard the bells. Above my sickbed, the seer tilted its face back and screamed.

I ordered the vestals guarding Maud's apartments to stand aside. They refused, and so I allowed my seer to chase them off.

Maud lay in bed with a schell when I came into her room. She gave no orders for the schell to stop its explorations, merely lifted her head to gaze at me with glazed eyes.

"A miraculous —" She shifted, closing her hands in the schell's hair. "—recovery."

"I ought to strangle you."

Maud arched her beautiful neck. "Mmm. Do what you like." Just then the seer came through the door. Immediately, Maud's schell rolled over and hissed. The seer tensed, but remained silently beside me as Maud sat up.

"So now the world's to the point where even a schell won't do its duty.

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Go away, you useless thing! Throw yourself in the river!"

The schell gathered its clothing, and walked warily past us out the door. I swallowed. A breath of air would have been enough to knock me on my back.

I said, "The time for settling accounts is now, Maud."

"Is it? I hadn't realized. In fact, Sister, I had hoped to see you today aboard the embalmer's. You and Mother packed together in a barrel like salted fish—"

I slapped her. For something I had wanted to do all my life, there was precious little satisfaction in it.

"You stupid cow! Doesn't your family mean anything to you? How can you lie there in bed while we're destroyed? Did you really imagine you'd live much longer than I? Think, Maud! You may hate me, but hating's no good. Not unless you make it work for you!"

Maud sneered. I slapped her again, harder. "Maud! Listen to me, damn you! We're all that's left, and it's our duty before the Sun to bury our differences and save ourselves."

She rubbed her face. "I could have had you killed."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"No." She seemed to shrink before my eyes.

"I know who gave the order."

"For certain?"

I nodded. "The seer fought the schell that attacked me," I said. "It didn't kill by strangling or breaking any bones."

"Oh?" From her expression, I could tell that she had already been informed of the condition of the dead schell's body.

"Yes, it seems the legends are true, at least in part. My seer drained the schell completely. Everything passed into it, leaving nothing but a husk. Everything, including the orders that had been given to bring about my death. I know what I'm saying, Maud! The poison paralyzed my will, I was ready to die, I wanted death! Somehow this creature knew that, and forced its way into my sickroom. It held me the same way it had held the schell, only more gently, and drew the poison out into itself. When that happened, I saw those things of the schell's that the seer had kept inside. I saw ... I saw the face of the real killer. Heard the killer's voice!"

I wanted to cry, but would not. Instead, I made my voice be strong. "I want you to get up now. I want you to put on your cloak, and to come with me."

"What for?"

"Vengeance."

It was the hottest part of the day, with the Sun's fierce Eye at the zenith, and so dazzling that the Veil could be seen only as a suggestion of violet the color of badly tempered steel. We rounded the final bend of the river in Maud's

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boat and saw the white houses of Almheraz standing out like pink and white blisters on the slopes of the bluffs below the Citadel. Yellow mourning pennants hung limply on standards above the Gormaynes' private harbor, where the queen's body cured slowly inside a special floating casket. Maud docked her boat nearby. Then, accompanied by the seer, we pulled our cowls over our faces and walked to the Agora.

Most of the market-stands were closed, until the Eye grew moderate. The shopkeepers kept to the shadows beneath awnings, talking to their neighbors, or smoking, or sleeping. A few merchants, especially those selling hard goods and clothing, were brave enough to keep their wares on display during such heat. We stopped beside one such stand; Maud snatched up a fan and fluttered it in front of her face.

"A shame you couldn't have recovered in the evening. And why have we come to this cesspit in the first place?"

"Shhh!" My seer had whistled softly; now it turned and stared — or would have, if there had been eyes behind its golden spectacles — at a small striped tent. The seer extended its tongue, and whistled again.

"In there," I said. The heat was making my ears buzz, but I could not show weakness now. I pushed through the flap and held it open for the others. As I had thought, the tent merely covered the entry ladder that lead to an underground chamber. We descended it cautiously, and found ourselves in an emporium of technical equipment: wire spools, electric generators and transformers, telegraphy and radio receivers, circuit boxes, switches, motors. Proscribed contraband, all of it, except when in the possession of ordained technicians and telegraphers.

There was a doorway leading to another chamber farther in. Just then, two sweating men emerged, backward, carrying an armature that had been wound with copper wire.

"What's this?" one of them said. It was his bad luck that he had not set down his end of the coil, for Maud and I moved quickly and put them to sleep. I used a choke hold taught to me by my mother. Maud used the flat of her sword.

"Think there's more?" she asked, eyes aglow.

"The noise would have brought them." Still, we waited a moment on either side of the door. When no reinforcements emerged, we entered the second chamber together.

It was very dark. We heard a whirring sound, and saw a red lamp moving in circles just ahead of us. Then Maud found a switch for the overhead light, and we saw that the noise and the lamp belonged to a tiny motor-tractor that pulled carts around and around a set of circular rails.

A little way off, leaning back on a chair set against the earthen wall, my brother, Danj, blinked his eyes and

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yawned. When he stopped, he looked from Maud, to my seer, then to me and laughed.

"My dreams have become increasingly improbable of late. Ah, but I'm told I must enjoy them, so tell me: Am I visited by traveling-souls, phantoms, zombies perhaps?"

"Your sisters," Maud said, raising her sword.

"No, Maud."

"But he's the one, isn't he? The voice you heard?"

"Yes." Danj continued to smile. He was a little drunk perhaps, or drugged. "You did order that schell to strangle me, didn't you, Danni?"

He sighed. "I suppose there's no way out of it; if I say no, you slay me for a liar — oh, and how Maudie would enjoy that! Say yes, and.... Well, then, punishment must fall to you, little sister. Quite a choice. I think for my own good, I'd better say yes!"

"Let me—"

"Maud, no! Danj is right. It *is* up to me." I looked at him, and he responded in the old way, with affection and a trace of pity evenly divided between us.

"Why, Danni?"

"Why not? I'm a man, after all. Property to you, someone amusing and occasionally useful, a cut above a schell, really. Look at you, Careev. Already you've placed that creature in a position of trust far beyond anything you'd ever grant me. Did you have marriage in mind? Plan to put me in as another weak king who must throw himself into the flames the moment your successor takes your last breath?"

"Father was never weak."

"But I'm not Father, am I? Both Mother and he made sure of that." His face grew serious. "There are machines and devices in this place whose possession brings a death sentence. It's ignorance the family's always thrived on. Oh, yes! Men brought the world to destruction before the Fall, and so long as women rule, we will never be allowed to make the world what it was. But we have to progress, Careev. We must. I simply did what had to be done."

"I've heard enough," Maud cried. "I'll kill him now!"

"That wouldn't be vengeance, Maudie. From you it would simply be murder. A favorite hobby of the family's, but in this instance, a crime the Sun would surely frown on." He smiled wanly. "No, if it's to be done at all, Careev must do it. Come forward, little sister. Take your knife and gut me with it, if you've got the courage!"

My hand closed around the hilt, and rage as ancient as the struggle between our sexes filled me with power enough to do the job. Danj's eyes mocked me as he waited. *See?* they said, *you can't do it, and because of that I'll wait, and one day I'll have my chance and finish the job....*

And yet, I still loved him, and always would. I turned and handed Maud the knife. Then I took my seer

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by the hand, led him forward to the place where Danj stood.

"If Danj so much as moves, you've my permission to use that sword, Maud."

"What do you think you're doing? Get that thing away from me!"

"Stay or move, the choice is yours." Danj's eyes grew wide, but he held his ground. I brought the hands of my seer up until its fingertips rested gently on either side of my brother's neck.

The fingers tightened, as they had on the neck of the schell assassin. Danj trembled like a fawn in the grip of a hunting cat. Then some of the fear dissolved, and he looked at the seer with an expression of wonder.

"Mother?"

The seer tightened its grip, grunting softly.

"Mother, it is you! You've no right to interfere in this world any longer. You know the prophecy as well as I! Let go! Let go!"

Seer and man screamed as one. Danj sunk to his knees; the creature followed, no longer screaming, but half-sobbing. It was the most human sound I had ever heard it make, the sound of a mother crying for her children. Hearing it brought tears to Maud's eyes, too.

Presently the seer released its hold. Danj wavered and blinked his eyes, and smiled the most beautiful smile I had ever seen.

"Carrie? Is that you, Carrie?"

I knelt down and put my arms around him. "Yes, love, it's me."

"Momma told me I'm a good boy."

"You are, Danni, you are."

"But I'm not *that* good. You wanna go fishing again, Carrie? I know a place where the schells can never find us, and we can stay as long as we want. Make a fire and roast what we catch and watch the river all night long. You want to, Carrie? Say yes! Please say yes."

My tears wet his cheek. Perhaps our mother's soul had been taken by the seer, and perhaps she had directed the seer to take in most, but not all of his life. Why could she not have done that for me!

"Yes, darling," I said, kissing him. "We'll go fishing. We'll go...."

One mercy remained.

Father's crew had wasted little time hauling the golden sails and banners onto the masts. Perhaps Father suspected that the poison had killed me; or perhaps his intention was to inform me that the conditions for his regency had been accepted. Whatever the meaning, I left Maud in charge of Danj and the seer, and boarded the golden barque alone.

The reception cabin had been put right, the throne returned to its place, the schells and male attendants dressed as fit their station. All bowed when I appeared, but I wasted no time with formality, and demanded to see the priest at once.

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Eccles rushed up from below. He managed to control his expression, but there was no hiding the red flush that settled on his cheeks and neck.

"My lady! Thank the Sun your souls remain with us!"

"I'll see my father now, priest."

"I beg your pardon, Lady, but he wished to say he still needs more time." Eccles removed a document from his sleeve. "However, he has signed the instrument exactly as you dictated it to me. Your own seal is all that is required for it to take effect."

"When did Father sign this?" I asked coldly.

"This morning, Lady. After he heard about the despicable attack upon your person."

"Making certain he would not be garroted, as I was!" I pushed past Eccles, taking the ladder into the hold. The king's cabin was guarded by several armed schells who closed ranks at my approach, but I was furious, and shoved all of them aside. None dared oppose my will with the orders they had been given.

My father — the man I had always feared more than death itself — sat propped in a chair. One side of his face was slack, and the coal black eyes had faded to a dusty gray.

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"A stroke, my lady." Eccles's voice came from behind me. "He suffered it during the journey down from the Cordillera. His body remains strong, but his mind...."

"I see." Without turning, I said, "I wish your telegraphers to broadcast a proclamation. That I, Queen Apparent, announce my betrothal to Cyre of Gormayne, regent, and that we will be married with full ceremony in the temple on the day after Gormayne's interment."

Eccles gasped. "My lady—"

"I have the signed instrument, priest! Cyre has agreed that whatever happens to me, must also happen to him. I'm to be married. So shall he." Now I turned to see hatred in his face. "The morning after the queen died, my brother breakfasted here, did he not? A dish of birds, I believe. What other dishes have you served, priest? What morsels did you bring my mother and father? Answer me! Answer me!"

Later, when he had been seized, I let Maud have her husband back. The work she did then satisfied her, I think. At least, and for a time, we were both very happy.

On the morning of my wedding day, I took my brother fishing.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 34

In the September issue we asked for SF titles that should have been written by historical figures (and since so many contemporary figures were submitted, we accepted these as well). This proved the most popular competition in years, with many hundreds of submissions and lots of repeats. (Some of our favorites: *Firestarter* by Mrs. O'Leary's Cow; *The One Tree* and *No Blade of Grass* by James Watt.)
The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

"...And Call Me Conrad" by Joseph Conrad

Slow Sculpture by August Rodin

That Hideous Strength by Arnold Schwarzenegger

The Stars My Destination By Rona Barrett

The Food of the Gods by James Beard

"He Who Shapes" by Richard Simmons
—*Al Sarrantonio*
Putnam Valley, NY

SECOND PRIZE

The Hunger by Karen Carpenter

I Sing the Body Electric by Ethel and Julius Rosenberg

Dr. Strangelove by Dr. Renee Richards

The Last Castle by Bobby Fischer

Strange Wine by Ernest and Julio Gallo

Approaching Oblivion by Ronald Reagan
—*Richard Gilliam*
Huntsville, AL

RUNNERS UP

All the Myriad Ways by Masters and Johnson

"Blowups Happen" by Alfred Nobel

Caught in the Organ Draft by Johan Sebastian Bach

'Altered States" by Jefferson Davis

The White Plague by Malcolm X
—*Elaine Hampton*
Burbank, CA

Lord of the Flies by Babe Ruth

Definitely Maybe by Werner Heisenberg

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe by Howard Johnson

R. Is for Rocket, S Is for Space and *The Word for World Is Forest*, a trilogy by Noah Webster
—*Bruce Berges*
Inglewood, CA

The People that Time Forgot by Henry Luce

S Is for Space by Harry S. Truman

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The Man Who Folded Himself by August Mobius

"The Girl Who Was Plugged In" by Ethel Rosenberg

—*Jean MacKay Jackson*
Broken Arrow, OK

The Revolving Boy by Ibrahim Dervish Pasha

The City and the Stars by Louella Parsons

The High Crusade by Dr. Timothy Leary

To Your Scattered Bodies Go by Ariel Sharon

—*S. Hamm*
San Francisco, CA

"One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts" by Jimmy Carter

The Star Fox by Sally K. Ride

After Things Fell Apart by Richard M. Nixon

—*Steve Perram*
Bellingham, WA

The Puppet Masters by Charlie MacCarthy

Friends Come in Boxes by Joe Bonanno

The People: No Different Flesh by The Donner Pass Writers' Collective

—Benjamin Freedman
London, Canada

COMPETITION 35 (suggested by S. Hamm)

Send us up to a dozen capsule reviews of any Sf or fantasy title, e.g.:

Russ, *The Female Man:* Loved him, hated her

Lasswitz, *Two Planets:* 1½ stars

Pohl, *A Plague of Pythons:* Less fun than a barrel of monkeys

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by March 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 35 will appear in the July Issue.

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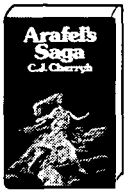

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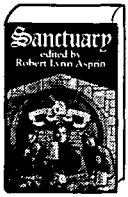
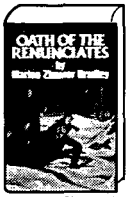


0539 Thieves' World; Tales from the Vulgar Unicorn; Shadows of Sanctuary. Spec.ed.

5637 Split Infinity; Blue Adept; Juxtaposition. Comb.pub.ed. $34.40



0554 The Shattered Chain; Thendara House. Spec.ed.

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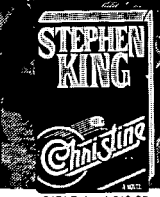

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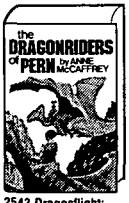

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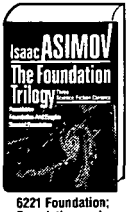

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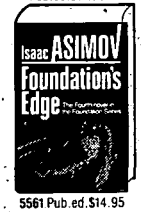

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